

Chapter 1

Albus leaned back in his chair and sighed. The interviews for the open teaching positions had been grueling. He had managed to hire all but one position, and he had very little hopes for that one. He was finally seeing the last of the applicants for the Divination post. Cassandra Trelawney had been one of the most gifted Seers it had ever been Albus's pleasure to converse with, and her granddaughter was applying for the position. Unfortunately, from what Albus had been able to learn, Sybill was as *un*-talented in precognitive gifts as her famous grandmother was talented.

He opened the door and let her into the room.

He'd been right. She had managed to fail every one of the tests he had placed before her, although he had not told her that. She had a flair for the dramatic that was unsurpassed by none that he could remember, except for perhaps that one student that had passed through Hogwarts earlier – Gilderoy Lockheart, he seemed to recall as being the student's name. *I find myself hoping that I never see him again. That young man managed to grate on even my nerves.*

He had risen to his feet and was about to gently escort Miss Trelawney to the door with a speech that the Muggles knew quite well as the “Don't call us, we'll call you” speech, when it happened. She stiffened and her eyes unfocused behind the thick glasses that she wore. As her mouth opened, he knew that he was in the presence of true Prophecy, and strove to remember every last second of the words that she spoke.

“THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES ... BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES ... BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM ... THE ONE SHALL BE MARKED AS AN EQUAL ... THE BETRAYED SHALL REMAIN TRUE ... ONE MUST DIE BY THE HAND OF THE OTHER AND ONE WILL MAKE THE WORLD ANEW ... THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES ...”

As she spoke, Albus heard all sound cease from outside the room. *Obviously Aberforth heard the Prophecy as it began and is precluding anyone else hearing more than they should. Excellent.* He very carefully committed the words she was speaking to his memory, because he knew that they would not be delivered if they were not of some import.

She shook her head as she came out of her trance, and looked at Albus oddly. "I'm sorry, sir, did you say something to me?"

"Yes, Miss Trelawney. Or should I say Professor Trelawney. You are hereby accepted in the role of Divinations Professor, to begin as soon as you are capable of bringing your belongings to Hogwarts. You will begin teaching this Fall term. Welcome!"

She nodded happily, and Albus found himself thanking whomever might be listening that she did not state that she had foreseen her acceptance. She quickly exited the room, and was quickly replaced by the bartender of the disreputable joint.

"Take it she left to get her things?" he growled.

Albus waved his wand and the door sealed shut as several Silencing charms also coated the walls. "You can drop the voice now, Aberforth. I know you hate to talk like that for long."

"You get used to it. I found a greasy-haired man that I'm fairly certain works for Voldemort listening outside the door. I know he heard part of it, but he Disapparated right about the point where she said 'thrice defied him'. I never had the chance to try to modify his memory or Obliterate him." He shrugged "You might want to warn some of your Order members to be on their guard, even more so than usual."

"No one fits the description so far, but if things continue in the vein that they have been, I would not be surprised to see both the Potters and the Longbottoms easily fulfilling the 'thrice defied' part of the Prophecy Miss Trelawney just delivered." He paused. "I assume you meant *Obliviate*."

"Don't forget the Weasleys either, Albie old boy. Molly and Arthur are about as Light-side as they come, and I could easily see Molly

spitting in Voldemort's face." Aberforth's face split into a nasty grin. "And I meant what I said, Albus."

Albus chose to ignore his older brother's comments, and continued to talk about the message that he had just been privy to. "To be honest, I think that the Prophecy is quite precise. With their actions, they have already surpassed the count of three in defying Voldemort's aims. Unless Molly is already pregnant again and somehow able to give birth to a healthy four month old baby, I must consider that they are a possibility, but in all likelihood an extremely slim one." He sighed again. "I now have a teacher who will be teaching a generation or more of my students information that will serve them not at all. But I can not afford to allow the Death Eaters to get their hands on her. She does not consciously remember the Prophecy, but it might be extracted from her." He paused to think for a moment. "On that note, could you please contact either James or Frank and ask them to escort Miss Trelawney to pick up her things?"

"I'll get Frank. James has enough on his plate right now, what with his wife not only being pregnant -"

"As is Alice Longbottom," Albus interrupted.

"Yes, but his wife isn't carrying a Death Eater child, unlike Lily Potter."

"I am unconvinced about the truth of that, Aberforth," Albus said. "But feel free to call Frank in for this mission, such as it is." Abe nodded and left the room, Albus following him a few minutes later.

The birth had been difficult, but finally an exhausted Lily Potter held in her arms the child she had borne below her heart these past nine months. "What shall I do?" she whispered to him. "You are so undeniably mine, my son, but you are not my husband's. I love you, but you are a reminder of that horrible time. What do I do?"

"First off," her father-in-law said, "you'll stop being so sentimental about Death Eater spawn. He'll be given to a nanny to deal with."

"Excuse me?" Lily replied, her voice going icy.

James Harold Potter V shrugged. "I'm sorry, Lily. I know you've just given birth and want to bond with the child, but it will make it that much harder when he turns on you as an adult. And make no mistake, he will turn – blood will out." He sighed softly. "I wish that it weren't true."

"It's not. We hear that all the time in the Muggle world, and it's constantly proved wrong. The argument about upbringing having nothing to do with it is wrong!" she answered hotly.

"But that's the Muggle world. You know that magic affects things, Lily," he replied. "Blood really *does* tell here in the wizarding world. Talents run in families, and some of them are Dark talents. You and Jimmy ... you admit yourself that it can't be Jimmy's baby, since you haven't succeeded in five years. The Death Eaters grab you and ... well, euphemistically speaking, make you the guest of 'honour' at a damned revel, and suddenly you're pregnant. You know as well as I do that it has to be a Death Eater's baby. I'll lay ten thousand Galleons that he has a Dark talent."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then I accept the boy with open arms. If I'm right, St. Mungo's gets a new wing."

A woman entered the room and reached for the baby. "I'm the wet nurse that Mr. Potter hired. If I may, ma'am?"

Lily looked deeply conflicted, so her father-in-law reached out and gently took the baby from her and handed him to the wet nurse. Lily felt tears come to her eyes as she watched the woman leave the room, and James took her into his arms and held her as if she were his own child. "It will be all right, Lily. Jimmy will come back from his mission for the Order soon, and then you can cry on his shoulder. It may seem cruel, but this really is for the best. Wasting your motherly love on a young man who will never accept it will only hurt you deeply when he turns on you someday. It hurts now, but you'll understand, one day." He patted his daughter-in-law on the back, wishing he could remove her pain.

"I'll be back shortly, Mombi," James Potter said to the house elf. "I need you to watch over Harry for a while. I'll be back before morning, hopefully with Lily and our first child." He snorted. "Imagine having Halloween as a birthday," he chuckled.

"Mombi will watch Master Harry," the house elf replied quietly.

"How many times must I remind you not to call him that. He is not a Potter and never will be. He may have the last name, but he will never run the family. He is not and will not be Master Harry." James Potter scowled as he looked at the elf. No matter how often she was chastised, she refused to bow to James' command on this one issue – to her, Harry was 'Master Harry'. James was certain that he could make her stop, but that way lay the likelihood of becoming no different than Lucius Malfoy. He shook his head and Apparated to St. Mungo's to be with Lily as her labour entered its final hours.

Mombi popped into the nursery, where she found Harry sleeping peacefully. "Mombi will care for you, Master Harry," she said. "Mombi loves you, and will for all her life."

James and Lily came home close to midnight cradling their daughter Sienna in their arms. "Mombi!" called James as loudly as he dared with a brand new baby near him. There was no answer, so he called a little louder, but still found no response. As he listened closer, he could hear the sound of crying coming from the nursery. He looked to Lily and scowled. "Why is he crying? Why won't she answer?"

"Could something have happened to him?" she asked with worry in her voice.

He shrugged, less concerned with the fate of the baby already in the nursery than for the reason that he might be crying and receiving no comfort. "We'll call my father and Albus and get them here now. We'll check the house out once they're here." He headed to the closest fireplace and called out "Potter Manor" as the Floo powder entered the flames. His father's head appeared almost immediately.

"Jimmy? What's wrong?" the elder Potter asked, worry already in his voice. "Is Lily all right? Do you need me to come over?"

"Yes to your last two questions, Dad," James Potter VI replied. "She's fine, as is little Sienna, but one of our house elves is missing, and Harry is crying up a storm. Mombi would never let that happen. I need you and Albus here as soon as possible before we start to check out the house."

"Call Remus and Sirius as well," Lily added softly. "The more people we have checking, the better off we are."

A short time later, Albus Dumbledore, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, James Potter the elder and Minerva McGonagall stepped through the fireplace in rapid succession. Minerva joined Lily to protect her, and the men began to search the house.

The search showed nothing except a forced entry through their kitchen and evidence that led to the nursery. What they found in the nursery surprised them. They found the fifteen month old Harry crying, his forehead bleeding. On the floor near his crib lay a set of empty robes.

Albus's eyebrows rose as he recognised the garments, but James Senior whistled. "Are those -" he asked in wonder.

"They certainly look like Voldemort's robes," Sirius replied. "Given his reaction the one time someone tried to impersonate him, I tend to think that we either have a naked Dark Lord or a dead one. My vote is on dead. Don't want to imagine a naked one." He shuddered theatrically before breathing out forcefully as the import of what he had just said struck him. "He is dead! You can feel it, somehow." He reached into the crib and picked up Harry. "Did you defeat the big bad Dark Lord, little Harry?"

"Please don't," James Senior said with some asperity. "First off, how could a fifteen month old child defeat a full-grown wizard?"

"I don't know," Sirius said, "but I'd appreciate you not disparaging my godson within either his or my hearing, sir." His tone was anything but the jovial one so commonly heard within these walls.

“Are we going to have this conversation again, Sirius?” the elder Potter asked. “You're too soft-hearted.”

“Better than being as hard-hearted as you, Mr. Potter,” he replied coldly.

“I'll thank the two of you not to fight in front of my son,” Lily said from the doorway. “Or my daughter for that matter.”

The party lasted for three days, and led to the setting of a record within the Ministry for the single largest number of Muggle Obliviations in one twenty-four hour period. The young Harry Potter developed the appellation of 'The Boy Who Lived' by being the first individual to face the now dead Dark Lord and survive. Somehow, it was believed by the public, Harry had defeated Voldemort while still in his crib. No one knew how, but he was lauded for it.

They tried to ask the house elves about it, but the most concise description that they received was to be told, “Mombi threw herself in way of nasty spell. Mombi protects Master Harry. Master Harry destroys dark wizard.” When they tried to find out what spell had been used, they discovered that the only elf who had witnessed any of it had no colour vision – he could only see in black and white. Given the tendencies that Voldemort had shown the years he was consolidating his power, it was accepted that the curse had likely been his favourite – *Avada Kedavra*.

The conversation in the Potter household was far different, however. The Marauders had their first meeting since the downfall of Voldemort, and it was not a pretty experience. The five of them, Lily included in this meeting, sat around the dining room table talking.

“He's the son of a Death Eater,” James stated. “For all we know, this is actually a plan by Voldemort to lull us into a sense of false security by thinking he's dead. Harry could be his conduit, his trigger, his ... what is the word I'm looking for ... basically, his method back to power.”

"This is your son that you're talking about!" Sirius yelled. "You can sit there and tell me that a fifteen month old child is involved with the rebirth of a Dark Lord, even though we have no reason to believe that he's even coming back?"

"He is not my son," James growled. "He's the child of some Death Eater from the Halloween that those bastards kidnapped and raped my wife. My father has always said it, and I think he's right in this case. Blood will out, and that boy is the child of a Death Eater. He'll be one himself one day."

"I can not believe that you are the same James Potter that risked everything for me when you discovered that I happen to be a werewolf," he said with a great deal of anger colouring his voice. "Think of what you're saying. This is an innocent fifteen month old boy, James! How can you think that he's part and parcel of some evil plot? You should be raising him as if he *were* your son! Prove the old adage wrong. Make him your son. Treat him as he deserves to be treated, not as the dangerous thing you act as if he is." Lily gasped and ran from the room.

"I think you owe Lily an apology, Remus," James said coldly. "Have you no heart? Harry is the child of a rape, and your attitude tells her that you don't care about that."

"Excuse me? I don't care about that? I happen to care a great deal about that, but I also care about that child that the three of you treat so callous. He's fifteen months old, for Merlin's sake! What kind of vile Death Eater plans can he make?"

James looked at his werewolf friend for a long moment. "Remus, do you have any intention to apologise to Lily for your insensitivity?"

Remus returned the look, stunned. James had apparently not even listened to what he had said. "To be honest, at this point in time, no. I believe that what I said was true and correct, and needed to be said, whether or not the two of you want to hear it. I will not apologise for speaking what I believe to be the truth."

James closed his eyes for a moment. "That being the case, Mister Lupin, I hereby request that you vacate the premises until such time

as you are willing to apologise for the insensitivity that you have shown my wife.”

Remus cocked an eyebrow skyward, and then got to his feet. “Very well, Mister Potter. We shall not cross paths again unless it happens to be a public function. It was nice knowing you.” He turned to Sirius. “I’ll see you later, Sirius, Peter?” Sirius nodded numbly as he watched Remus walk proudly from the room. Peter’s reaction was wide-eyed, but he also nodded to Remus.

When they heard the tell-tale crack of Remus’s Apparation, Sirius turned to James. “Congratulations, Prongs. You just managed to chase away one of the Marauders with your stupid pride. Did you even think to ask Lily about this before you told him that you no longer consider him to be a friend?” Before James could even answer, Sirius stood and stalked from the room, his Apparation sounding like an explosion as he left.

Peter simply shook his head. “I’m not entirely happy with you at the moment either, Prongs. Remus was always the thinker of the group. Would it really hurt to think about what he said? Would it really hurt to give a baby the benefit of the doubt? Think where I might have been if you hadn’t done that with me, giving me the benefit of the doubt. For all I know, I might have been tempted to join Voldemort’s side.” He sighed. “Think about what it means, James, when Sirius and I feel like we have the moral high ground. Isn’t that a pretty lousy position for you to be in?” He also turned and left the Potter home, leaving James to face Lily, who had two crying children with her.

Chapter 2

Harry ran pell-mell through the lawn of the Weasley home as only a five year old boy can do. He was chasing his friend Ron as they played something that had started out as a game of Tag, but had devolved into running helter-skelter just for the fun of it. Ron's little sister Ginny was running with them, and somewhere along the line had done as so many children do at that age – she had lost her shirt. No one noticed or even cared, except perhaps for nine year old Percy, who was out attempting to supervise the others. “Ginevra Weasley!” he called out. “Where did you lose your shirt?”

“If I knew, it wouldn't be lost!” she giggled back at him before tearing off after Harry and Ron again.

“Give it up, Percy,” Molly Weasley said with a chuckle. “It's not like she's doing anything wrong.”

“But Mum!” he replied, scandalised. “She's running around without a shirt in front of a boy! One who isn't a member of the family!”

She laughed openly. “If she's still doing it in another ten years, I'll worry. Until then, I don't think that we have anything to complain about. You can go off to see your friends if you'd like. I'll take over here.” She sat down, placing the cup of tea she'd brought with her on the picnic table.

“Thanks, Mum!” Percy said, kissing her cheek before running into the house. Sirius stepped out of the house carrying his own cup of tea, narrowly avoiding a collision with Percy.

Before she could call after Percy, he said, “My fault, really. I was standing in the doorway listening. Forgot how fast a young boy can run.” He looked out into the field. “I know I say it often, but I will continue to, Molly. I thank you so very much for treating Harry the way you do. I'd honestly wash my hands of James and Lily if I wasn't so set on keeping an eye on Harry.”

“He's such a sweet child,” she said with a scowl. “How they can act the way that they do toward him is beyond my understanding.”

"Lily is conflicted," Sirius said. "I forgive her somewhat, because Harry *is* a constant reminder of that horrible night almost six years ago. They're so certain that he's the child of rape, although to look at him today, I find myself less and less certain of that. He takes on more of James' characteristics every day." He shook his head. "Sorry, sidetracked myself. Lily looks at him and wants to be close to him, but he reminds her of an awful time. She doesn't intend to, but she gives Sienna and the youngest to be named James Potter noticeably more loving than she does Harry. Hell, even think of his name. James Harold Potter is the name to be given to the first male heir born to the Potter line. I don't know if it was laziness or cruelty, but to intentionally reverse the order and even shorten one of the names? Some day he's going to realise that at least his father and grandfather will never consider him theirs. And that's sad, you know? They're missing out on a wonderful boy's life because 'blood will out' or some such crap."

"Have they ever realised how much they're insulting you when they spout that? Does James really think about what he's calling you?"

Sirius stared at her for a long moment before beginning to laugh quietly. It was not an entirely pleasant laugh – it harboured feelings of revenge within it. "Bless your heart, Molly Weasley! If I didn't think your husband would get jealous and hurt me, I'd kiss you."

"Why?" she asked, blushing slightly.

"James occasionally goes off on Remus and his refusal to apologise to Lily. Mind you, I've heard Lily say that she doesn't need one, but James is getting all macho and crap, like I used to do at Hogwarts. He keeps spouting the same damned line that his father does."

"So, the next time he tells me that blood will out, or blood will tell, or whatever the heck it is, I'll simply stand and thank him for telling me what he really thinks of me. I'll probably also remind him that his attitude strongly resembles that of people such as Lucius Malfoy and his hatred of 'Mudbloods'. That should be good for a punch, especially since Lily *is* a Muggleborn."

He sighed deeply. "I just wish I knew where my friend went. I know we're supposed to grow up and all that sh ... stuff, but I thought that I knew him better than that. Where did my friend go?"

"I don't know. Maybe the James you knew was another casualty of the fight against You Know Who."

"I don't like that idea, to be honest, but you just might be right." He stopped and offered a quick scowl. "My problem is really with his father. The man used to be open minded, but ever since those bastards grabbed Lily and did what they did, he's become this hard-ass fool. He's not the man that I grew to respect back in school." He blinked. "Gah. I've been out of school for ten years now, Molly! I've become an adult! Quickly, I must prank someone!" he laughed.

She joined him in laughter, which is how Arthur found them a few minutes later. "Gasp," he stated. "My wife is laughing with another man. Whatever shall I do?"

Sirius looked up, chuckling. "Take better acting lessons?" he asked with a far too cheeky grin. "How are you, Arthur?"

"Good, Sirius. Tiring day at work, but fun nonetheless. Had to chase down a rampaging Muggle typewriter. Someone charmed it to move and to self-write pornographic notes to people. Some of them were quite inventive." He shook his head in amusement. "How are you and Harry doing?"

"Pretty good," Sirius replied. "I'm getting worried, though. He's starting to get to that age where he's going to recognise soon that the way he's treated is different from the way that Sienna and James Junior are treated. They don't hate Harry, but they are obviously loved more. They get more gifts at Christmas and birthdays, and James actually gives them gifts. Lily gives them all gifts, and gifts from both of them, but James refuses to."

Arthur scowled deeply. "The fool is going to ... no, you Remus and Peter will prevent that." He looked at Sirius. "You are aware that you three are likely the only ones that will end up preventing Harry from going dark? If James and Lily keep up the way that they are, they'd

be the very ones to cause him to become what they keep saying he is.”

“If I remember Remus, I think the Muggles call that a self-fulfilling prophecy,” Sirius said.

The adults paused to watch Ginny run by, squealing happily, her newly found shirt being used as a cape (they assumed), with Harry and Ron tearing after her, laughing.

“Y'know, Molly, you really need to tell that girl to cheer up,” Sirius said with a dead-pan delivery as the other two adults laughed.

Harry scowled at the mess on the floor. He knew fully well that despite all the evidence pointing correctly toward the real culprit, she'd escape the punishment for the broken vase. *I'm the child of the bad man, after all*, he thought darkly. *Sienna would never break a vase.*

He reached down and picked up his sister's hair ribbon and began to clean up the pieces, waiting for his mother or father to walk in on his efforts and make the wrong assumption. As he was picking up the last piece, he heard someone enter the room. *Ah, Mum. At least she pretends to be fair in her punishments.*

“What happened, Harry?” she asked.

With the bitterness that only an aggrieved seven year old can manage he replied, “Not that you'll believe me, but it was broken when I got into the room. I figured I'd pick up all the pieces and make it easier for someone to fix it without having to pull pieces out of a foot.”

“*Reparo*,” Lily said simply, returning the vase to its unbroken condition. She looked at him for a long moment before saying, “Thank you for being so thoughtful, Harry.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek lightly.

Well, didn't expect that, he thought.

Merlin, the loathing in his voice when he explained! Lily thought to herself as she sat down in her study. She was intending to work more on her Charms, but she could not get his tone out of her voice. *Could a seven year old really have that much hatred?*

More importantly, have we been unfair in our punishments? I know James would say no, but he's becoming more and more like his father, and I didn't marry James Senior. She began to think about the punishments that they had doled out over the years, and began to frown. The more that she considered, the more she realised that she needed to begin mending fences with the child, if it weren't too late. *And I am going to have to stomp on James' tendencies to emulate his father as far as Harry is concerned.*

She headed back out of her study and looked for her first-born son. *That may be the first time that I have admitted it,* she thought to herself. *No matter the circumstances of his conception, I carried him within me for nine months. He is my son, no matter what they say.*

She finally heard him as she neared one of the play rooms. "...this up."

"Why?" Sienna's voice said. "You could have left everything and I'd have gotten the blame."

The harsh laugh made Lily wince. "You know better than that, Sienna. You use the fact that I get blamed for everything to avoid trouble all the time. You know that Father hates me. He could watch you break the vase and he'd blame me for it somehow." There was a pause, and then Harry began to speak again. "Besides, you're my half-sister. I'm supposed to protect you. It's what older brothers do."

Lily chose to make her presence known. "I came in at the very end. Sorry for listening in on your conversation. What are you protecting her from?"

"Nothing, really," Harry said with a shrug. "Just telling her that she can count on me."

“Does this have something to do with that broken vase earlier?” Lily asked with a hidden smile. She had her answer when both children look in panic at each other for a moment before their eyes went to the floor.

She walked over and knelt before Sienna. “I can see that you're holding your hair ribbon. Did Harry give it back to you after you accidentally broke the vase?” Her daughter bit her lower lip for a moment before nodding quickly.

“I didn't mean to! I know that I shouldn't have been running in the manor, but I was, and I bumped the table. I must have dropped the ribbon.” She bit her lower lip, which began to quiver. “I was going to ignore it, hoping to get Harry in trouble, since it's so easy to do.” She looked at Harry and big tears began to come to her eyes. “I'm sorry, Harry.”

He smiled. “I thought so. Just ... just don't do it again, okay?” he asked. She nodded with a sniffle.

“Now I need to start making up to you as well, Harry,” Lily said. “I've not treated you as a mother should. You've no control over the circumstances of your birth, and I've treated you as if you do. Can you forgive me?”

Harry stared at her for a long moment, eyes wide with shock at her admission, before he finally burst forward and hugged her tightly, beginning to cry as he held her. “Why didn't you love me before, Mummy?” he gasped through his sobs.

His question tore through Lily, and as she patted her son's back, she vowed to change, and to make James see the light in some way.

“I'm sorry to impose upon you in this way, Sirius,” Lily said as she entered 12 Grimmauld Place with her three children. “James and I have been idiots, and I've only just come to my senses in the last few months.”

“Why do you think I'm letting you move in while James works on getting his head out of his arse?” the irrepressible animagus said quietly, hoping that the children couldn't make out his words.

“I don't want to divorce him, but if he can't see what he's doing to Harry, then I'm not going to have a choice. He's simply not the man I fell in love with in sixth year. It's as if someone else is controlling him. I've checked for the Imperius,” she added quickly. “He's clean.”

“I've not known this James for years,” Sirius said. “He was a real prat growing up – well, we all were – but this is Lucius and my family talking out of his mouth now. He used to know better about all this 'blood will tell' crap. I thought he was going to kill me the day that I pointed out that his attitude about that pretty much said that he didn't trust me either, since I came from a known Dark family. We still speak, but we've been strained for a while.”

“I'm sorry. I know that James and his father were the ones who helped you through everything when you left your family. I just hope we can someday find that old James.”

“Me too,” she replied, pulling Harry closer to herself with one hand. “He's missing out of the childhood of a wonderful young man, and he'll never be able to reclaim that lost time.”

Chapter 3

"Is the settlement considered to be fair and equitable to both parties?" the magistrate asked.

"We both hurt, no matter what," Lily said quietly. "I have no problems with it, other than those previously stated, and which have no actual bearing on the settlement."

James spoke up. "I still don't understand why you protect that child, Lily. He'll turn on you someday, and you'll come crying that you should have listened to me." He shook his head. "I still love you, Lils. The only sticking point we have in this is Harry. He's not my child, and I refuse to treat him as such. I love and adore you, Sienna and James, but I will not waste any of my emotions on the child of a Death Eater. I can understand your desire, even, but it ... it's a bone of contention between us. I'll always hope for a reconciliation, Lily. I love you, and I always will. But that boy is not mine, and I will never treat him as if he were. Perhaps in a few years -"

"I understand," she replied, tears in her eyes. "I love you too, but I carried him for nine months, and I can't *not* love him. I'll someday get the spell worked out to find out who his father is, but that's neither here nor there. Maybe I'm too Muggle for the wizarding world, but I can't see how a child still in the womb is destined to be a danger just because his father was evil. And I just can't ... I can't stand by and watch you abuse him by ignoring him and blaming him for things that he can't control. So until you see the light about him -"

"We've had this conversation, and that's why we're here. I'm agreeable to the alimony payments. It's not like I can't afford it, and you were nicer than you had to be in your requests."

"I don't need to own you," she shrugged. "I just wanted enough to raise the three of them."

He nodded. "And thank you on the visitation. I won't reiterate again about Harry, since we're both tired of that argument."

She nodded. "I guess all that's left is for us to sign the papers and head to our respective homes."

Harry watched his mother return from the hearing, and started to walk toward her. She had changed in the past months – she treated him with the same love that she did Sienna and James, as opposed to the slight distance she had seemed to have before. He hadn't reached the doorway when he saw her break down and cry.

This is my fault, he thought. If only I weren't around, she could be with Father, and then she could be happy. He felt his own tears build behind his eyes, and he made no attempt to hide them. He silently headed to the stairs and went to his room, where he packed a bag, filling it with all the things that any eight year old boy thinks are important – Chocolate Frog cards, his lucky gobstones set, and even a handful of clothing

He grabbed a quill and a scrap of parchment and wrote a note. He knew that if he told her, she'd stop him, but he also knew that it was for the best.

Mummy,

I know that you'll be sad for a while when you get this, but as you said when you and Father broke up, "It's for the best."

You love him, and I know he loves you. I know that I'm the reason that you broke up, so if I'm not around, then you and him can be together. I'm not family anyway, so it's not like you're losing anything.

I love you, Mum. Please be happy.

Harry

He rolled up the note and carried it downstairs quietly, where he put it on the entry hallway table under a cute white stone owl that the family had named Owlabaster before sneaking back upstairs, to the sound of his mother's tears and both Sirius and Remus trying to comfort her. He headed into the master bedroom, picked up the Floo pot and

threw in a pinch of the powder as he enunciated "Diagon Alley" into the suddenly green flames. He stepped into The Leaky Cauldron and quickly turned to the door and stepped out into Muggle London before anyone could react to an eight year old popping out of the fireplace.

He probably would have been able to disappear into the wilds of London were it not for Arthur Weasley returning from a mission. The elder Weasley saw the familiar head of hair and chose to follow him. As he got closer, he could hear the occasional snuffle. Harry finally took a turn into an alley and sat down and started to cry.

Arthur's heart went out to Harry, and he wondered why the child was walking alone through London. "Harry?" he asked softly. Harry looked up, panicked, and relaxed slightly as he saw Arthur, but was still wary.

"Don't make me go back, sir. Things are better this way."

"What way?"

"I'm leaving. Mum and Father love each other very much, but I'm the reason that they're div...divorced? Divorced," he nodded at the end, happy to have remembered the word properly. "He hates me because I'm a Death Eater bastard, and Mum loves me because I'm her son." He sniffed deeply. "They both love Sienna and James. If I'm not there, then they can be together and be happy. The only difference would be that I won't be there to make them fight."

The sigh that Arthur released sounded as if he had the weight of the world suddenly placed upon his shoulders. "Harry, before you leave, will you at least come by and say goodbye to the rest of us? And maybe say goodbye to your mother?"

"I left Mum a note," Harry replied sincerely.

"I know, but from a parent's point of view, saying it in person is so much better." *And maybe she can convince him to return home.*

In short order, the two were standing in the Burrow, and a six year old Ginny was hugging him tightly and sobbing, and Molly was quietly calling Lily.

Harry watched as his mother shot out of the fireplace and stood before Harry, her lower lip quivering. When Ginny had finished crying against him, she swept Harry into her arms. "Oh, my beautiful boy! I'm so sorry you got caught in the middle of this!"

"Mum, it's better this way. You love him, and I know that he loves you. It's not like you're losing anyone important, it's just me, and I'm the bastard child of a Death Eater, so I'm not worth worrying about."

Lily gasped and pulled Harry even tighter to her breast. "Oh Harry," she said, voice quivering with barely controlled emotion. She finally let him go and knelt before him. "Harry, I love you, and in any choice between you and another, you will always win."

"Even Sienna and Junior?" he asked, somehow managing impudence in his tone.

"Don't push it, sport," she replied with a watery smile. She lost the smile quickly and put her hands on his shoulders. "I'm serious, Harry. If someone tells me that I have to choose between them and you, then I already know the answer. I carried you beneath my heart for nine months. You are my son, and you always will be. I don't care who your father is, be it God, the Devil, a Death Eater, or Merlin himself." She grinned as she remember her bible. "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased," she quoted.

"Even though I ran away?" he asked.

"Especially because of the *reason* that you were doing it. I don't like that you were gone, but you were doing it for all the right reasons. You were doing it out of love, even love for a man who denies you." She wiped away the tears that sprang to his face. "I'm sorry to say it that way, but it's true. But I'd miss you if you were gone, and the constant worry wouldn't help James and I stay together. If he and I are meant to be together, then we will be again someday. If not, then

I at least have three delightful children, and I can be happy.” She pulled him into another hug. “But I could never be happy if you were gone. Please don't leave me.”

“Okay, Mum,” he said, and finally truly let himself go, sobbing against her. She simply held him and let him cry himself out.

“I love you, baby boy,” she murmured. “I always will.”

Harry stood outside the door, scared of meeting the people behind it. He was meeting his mother's parents, but all he had as a reference was the way that James' father had reacted. He steeled himself as he heard the door start to open.

“Lily!” said a woman who could only be his mother's mother. “And who is this young man?”

“Mother, Harry is who I needed to introduce you and Dad to.” She seemed to deflate. “I was scared and stupid, and did my oldest son a horrible disservice.”

They entered the house and Harry was immediately swept into a very familiar hug. “So you're the darling boy she was so afraid to tell us about?”

The silence was deafening, but was quickly broken. “I wanted to say something, but you inherited your stubbornness from the both of us -”

“Tenacity, please,” Lily said with a smile. “Sounds better.”

“- stubbornness from us, and if we'd said anything, you'd likely have never spoken to us again. If it had looked as if he might get a letter from Hogwarts without us ever meeting him, then we would have taken the risk. As it is, we've lost eight years with him.”

“I'm sorry, Mum,” Lily said in a quiet voice. “I was stupid, and not thinking about my son.”

Harry only half-listened to the conversation as he was still wrapped in the embrace of his grandmother, and he was listening to the gentle sound of her heartbeat when she wasn't speaking. *They actually want to know me!* he marvelled. His own arms came up and he hugged her tightly.

"Jimmy and his father never showed him this kind of attention, did they?" she asked Lily.

"No, and to my eternal shame, I listened to their reasoning. It took Harry himself to shake me free of my stupidity."

Harry released his grandmother and turned to his mother, eyes blazing. "Stop saying that, Mum! You're not stupid."

"Listen to your son," a man said as he entered the room. "Dale and I didn't raise a stupid daughter." Harry could see his mother biting back a comment. "Leave Petunia out of this, dear. You admit yourself that we all make mistakes, and if you were able to realise yours, perhaps Pet will realise hers."

"Yes Daddy," came the contrite answer.

Harry spoke up. "Who's Petunia?"

"Petunia is our other daughter," Dale responded. "She was ... ah, she got jealous when Lily got her letter for Hogwarts. That put a wedge between them that Petunia has never gotten past."

"Sort of like how Father has never forgiven me for having a Death Eater for a father?" he asked simply.

The room was silent for a long moment, and just as Harry was about to apologise, Lily said, "Actually, that's exactly it. She hates something about me that I have no control over, and James can't get past the rape."

Dale scowled. "Roy, taking a good look at the boy, who would you guess his father is?"

"If I didn't know better, and I *don't* know better, I'd say that the boy is the spitting image of James Potter at about eight years old."

Lily took a long look at Harry before suddenly gasping and putting a hand to her mouth. Dale snorted. "Don't you wizards have paternity tests there? We non-magical people do, and they're pretty accurate. Do you mean to tell me you can't just wave that wand of yours and tell immediately?"

"No, the charm doesn't exist or else we'd have cast it as soon as he was born, and this likely never would have happened." She thought for a long moment.

"Then don't you think you ought to write one?" Roy asked. "I remember those notes from your Professor Flitwick – thought you were the best student he'd ever seen."

Lilly narrowed her eyes for several seconds before suddenly exclaiming, "I need to make some notes, Mum There isn't a charm yet to determine parentage, but there damned well will be when I'm done. Get the spell certified as infallible and shove it in James' face." She looked at her son. "No matter who the father is, I'm proud of this boy, and I will always be proud of him."

"That's the daughter we raised," Dale said, puffing his chest out. "Now, I assume that you left Sienna and James Junior with Sirius or their father so that we could get to know this fine young man?"

It was a week before Harry's eleventh birthday when two owls flew into the yard where the whole family was out enjoying the sun. One landed by Harry and held out its talons while the other landed by Lily. Harry undid the knot and the owl flew away, joined shortly by the delivery owl that his mother had just freed of its message.

Harry opened the letter, which was addressed in green ink: *Mr. H. Evans, The Back Garden, 12 Grimmauld Place, London, England.* Enclosed he found a letter that read as follows:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump,

International Confederation of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Evans,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress

He goggled at the letter. "Mum! Hogwarts sent me my letter!" He glanced at the other sheet, which was a list of requirements and such:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

- 1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)*
- 2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear*
- 3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)*
- 4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)*

Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk

A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot

Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling

A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration by Emetic Switch

One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore

Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble

OTHER EQUIPMENT

1 wand

1 cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)

1 set glass or crystal phials

1 telescope

1 set brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS.

He chuckled. "I wish I had my own broom. Sirius has a nice one that he lets me use when he's around to supervise me."

"Not until your second year, love," Lily chuckled. "I know that you're a natural, but rules are rules, even for the children of Professors."

Assuming, of course, that I take the job. I need to go talk to a couple people. Keep an eye on your brother, please?" She climbed from the chaise lounge that she'd been sunning herself in and headed inside.

Harry smiled as she did so. When she dressed as she was right now, in that bikini the same colour as her eyes, Sirius always seemed to try to find reasons to be nearby. She was his mother, but he had an eye for pretty girls, not seeming to have gone through the 'girls are icky' stage that so many boys do, and he had to admit that his mother certainly was very pretty. Uncle Sirius certainly seemed to think so. He chuckled at that thought.

He walked over to the letter and looked down at it. It was such that it didn't require any fussy movements to come up with an excuse to move it – he could just look down and read it.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump,

International Confederation of Wizards)

Lily,

You know all the titles and such by now. (One of the drawbacks of parchment that automatically prints a letterhead.) I am writing this letter to you in order to offer you the position of Professor of Charms at Hogwarts. Filius has decided that now is the time he would like to retire from teaching and return to his true love, which is research. He has recommended you for the position. He also recommends that you test for your Mastery. (In fact, he suggests that the notes for your senior project might well suffice to prove you worthy of the title.)

The down side of this offer is that James will be taking on the role of Professor of Flight while Xiomara deals with a family emergency this year. I'm certain that the two of you can work together, or at least pretend to.

Please Floo me when you receive this letter. More precisely, Floo me after speaking with Filius, as I'm certain you will wish to do before contacting me.

With affection,

Albus

Sirius and his mother exited the house, Lily with a bounce in her step and a smile on her face and Sirius with a look of interest in his eyes. Harry fought very hard to hide the laughter from watching Sirius's fight to keep his eyes off Lily's breasts as she walked.

"Well, son, how do you feel about being the son of Hogwarts' newest Charms Professor?"

"Cool!" he replied. "Means I get to see Sienna and James during the school year, right?"

"Yes it does. I just need to find a place to stay during the school year. I can commute, but the closer to the school that I am, the better it is all around."

Sirius cleared his throat. "Um, are you still going to need a baby-sitter for the two younger ones while you're teaching classes?"

"Yes. I assume that you're offering?"

"Yes, and I'm also offering a Black property in Hogsmeade. The five of us can easily move there, which gets you near the school, near Sienna and James, and also near Harry when you're *not* teaching him."

"Let's not forget that it leaves you close to Mum," Sienna quipped, and laughed at the deep blush from the two of them.

Harry snorted his laughter at their antics. *I'd say something, but they're both stubborn and would dig in their heels. I think that it would be great to have Sirius as my dad. Oh, sorry, as Mum said when I was introduced to Grandma and Grandpa – tenacious, not stubborn.*

"When shall we go into Diagon Alley?" Sirius asked. "You've got school supplies to buy."

"How about August first?" Lily said. "We can plan our purchases, and enjoy a nice day out."

"Works for me," Sirius said.

Diagon Alley was the same as Harry had always enjoyed, especially now, with everyone running around to be ready for school in a month. Students ran here and there for various things. They headed to Gringotts and found themselves in line behind a huge man. "Hagrid!" Lily said fondly. "How are you?"

"Fine, Lily, just fine," the giant of a man growled out amiably. "And I see yer've brought Harry to get his stuff for Hogwarts. I just need to get something for Dumbledore out of Vault seven thirteen and I'll be on me way. Hogwarts business, don't ya know. Good to see ya, Harry, and I'll see yer again at Hogwarts!"

"Good to see you too, Hagrid," Harry said with amusement. He liked the man already.

In short order the group was back out on the street, with Sirius heading off to get some of Harry's supplies while sending Lily and Harry off to get their robes. They entered Madame Malkin's to find the short woman in her usual mauve robes. She looked up. "Hogwarts, dear?" she said, when Harry started to speak. "Got the lot here - another young man being fitted up just now, in fact."

In the back of the shop, a boy with a pale, pointed face was standing on a footstool while a second witch pinned up his long black robes. Madame Malkin stood Harry on a stool next to him, slipped a long robe over his head, and began to pin it to the right length.

"Hello," said the boy, "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands," said the boy. He had a bored, drawling voice. "Then I'm going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll bully father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow. Have you got your own broom?" the boy went on.

"No," said Harry. "I'm not sure that you'd be able to sneak in a broom. I've heard things about how often they end up owling a bit of con ... uh, contraband, I think the word is ... a bit of stuff not allowed." He had a real dislike of this boy already. *Too arrogant by far.*

"I'm sure we Malfoys can figure something out. Draco Malfoy, by the way."

"Harry Evans," Harry replied.

The only description for the sound that erupted from Draco was a snerk. "The Bastard Who Lived?" he said with a vicious smirk.

"As opposed to the Idiot Who Probably Won't For Much Longer?"

"Are you threatening me?" the blonde asked incredulously. He schooled his expression to bland and disinterested again before speaking once more. "Understandable, considering your father is supposed to be a Death Eater."

Harry smiled maliciously. "Better be careful then, Draco. We might be half-brothers."

Harry decided that puce was not a good colour for Draco, who seemed to have gone apoplectic and taken the smart route, choosing not to speak any further. *Either that or I shut his brain down by talking back to him.*

As they left the store, Lily looked at her son. "That wasn't a very nice thing to do, Harry."

"I'm sorry, Mum, but he was ... no, you're right. I didn't give him a chance. I should go apologise to him."

"No, he started things with insulting you unnecessarily. An insult that could get him an offer of a duel if he were older. I'm saying that it wasn't a very nice thing to start a battle of wits with an apparently unarmed opponent." She held a straight face for just a few moments more before she finally started to smile, and then began laughing.

This was the scene that greeted Sirius as he rejoined them. "Your mum has that 'Gotcha!' look, Harry. What happened?"

"According to her, I started a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent. I met Draco Malfoy in Madam Malkin's."

"Cissy would be so unhappy," he murmured. "She's brilliant, that sod of a husband of hers is no slouch in the brains department, but their son is apparently an idiot."

Lily looked Sirius in the eye before saying in unison with him, "Inbreeding." This led them both into more laughter.

As they laughed, Harry looked at what Sirius was carrying. Most everything else was in shrunken bags, but he was carrying a cage containing an absolutely beautiful snowy white owl. The owl's eyes met Harry's, and there was a sense of rightness about things. "Hello, beautiful," he said as he opened the cage. The owl hopped out and then flew onto his shoulder. "Who's the lucky person that gets to call you friend?" The owl preened at his praise.

"You do, Harry," Sirius said. "I saw that owl in Eeylops and just knew that she had to be yours. After all, you'll want an owl for sending letters home to your family."

"True," Harry said with a chuckle. "After all, it's a long trek from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts. Might take this beautiful girl a whole five minutes to make the trip!" She nipped his ear as if to admonish him lightly for his comment.

They reached the building, which looked a little disreputable, being narrow and shabby looking. Peeling gold letters announced that it was 'Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.' Harry looked a little unsure of what was about to happen, but Sirius said, "Looks bad, kiddo, but we're at the best wand maker in all of England. If he

can't supply you with a wand, then it's likely that there isn't a wand perfectly suited to you."

A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as they stepped inside. It was a tiny place, empty except for a single, spindly chair. Harry felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library; he swallowed a lot of new questions that had just occurred to him and looked instead at the thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. For some reason, the back of his neck prickled. The very dust and silence in here seemed to tingle with some secret magic.

"Good afternoon," said a soft voice. Harry jumped. An old man was standing before them, his wide, pale eyes shining like moons through the gloom of the shop.

"Hello," said Harry awkwardly.

"Ah yes," said the man. "Yes, yes. I thought I'd be seeing you soon. Harry Potter." It wasn't a question. "You have your mother's eyes. It seems only yesterday she was in here herself, buying her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charm work." He turned to Lily. "Is that wand still working well for you?"

"It had better be," she answered with a smile. "I'm starting as Professor of Charms at Hogwarts in a month."

"Excellent!" Ollivander said as he moved closer to Harry. Harry wished he would blink. Those silvery eyes were a bit creepy.

"Your father, on the other hand, favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration. Well, I say your father favored it - it's really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course."

"You know who my father is?" Harry asked. "And sir? The last name is Evans. James Potter isn't my father."

Mr. Ollivander had come so close that he and Harry were almost nose to nose. Harry could see himself reflected in those misty eyes.

"James Potter is a fool, then. Anyone with eyes can tell who fathered you, Mr. Evans." Mr. Ollivander touched the lightning scar on Harry's forehead with a long, white finger.

"I'm sorry to say I sold the wand that did that," he said softly. "Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands...well, if I'd known what that wand was going out into the world to do..." He shook his head. "Well, now - Mr. Evans. Let me see." He pulled a long tape measure with silver markings out of his pocket. "Which is your wand arm?"

"Er - well, I'm right-handed," said Harry.

"Hold out your arm. That's it." He measured Harry from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. As he measured, he said, "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr. Evans. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

Harry suddenly realized that the tape measure, which was measuring between his nostrils, was doing this on its own. Mr. Ollivander was flitting around the shelves, taking down boxes.

"That will do," he said, and the tape measure crumpled into a heap on the floor. "Right then, Mr. Evans. Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible, just take it and give it a wave."

Harry took the wand and (feeling foolish) waved it around a bit, but Mr. Ollivander snatched it out of his hand almost at once.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try - "

Harry tried - but he had hardly raised the wand when it, too, was snatched back by Mr. Ollivander.

"No, no - here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, go on, try it out."

Harry tried. And tried. He had no idea what Mr. Ollivander was waiting for. The pile of tried wands was mounting higher and higher on the spindly chair, but the more wands Mr. Ollivander pulled from the shelves, the happier he seemed to become.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere - I wonder, now - yes, why not - unusual combination - holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Harry took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the dusty air and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the walls. Sirius whooped and clapped while Lily laughed at Sirius's antics. Mr. Ollivander cried, "Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good. Well, well, well...how curious...how very curious..."

He put Harry's wand back into its box and wrapped it in brown paper, still muttering, "Curious...curious..."

"Sorry," said Harry, "but what's curious?"

Mr. Ollivander fixed Harry with his pale stare.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Evans. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather - just one other. It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother why, its brother gave you that scar."

Harry swallowed.

"Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember...I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Evans...After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things - terrible, yes, but great."

Harry shivered. He wasn't sure he liked Mr. Ollivander too much. He paid seven gold Galleons for his wand, and Mr. Ollivander bowed them from his shop.

Chapter 4

Sirius, Remus and Peter smiled as he watched Harry step onto the platform. He was terribly excited to get to the school. All the stories that he'd been told by the three Marauders, not to mention his mother, had him nearly vibrating in anticipation. Lily had headed on to Hogsmeade a week ago with all three children, but Harry had come back with Sirius and Sienna yesterday, since she insisted that Harry ride the Hogwarts Express. "It's an experience you'll have only once in your life, Harry, and I don't want you missing it."

He looked around and found the Weasleys milling about near the entrance. "Aunt Molly!" he cried out, running toward them. The others smiled indulgently at him and he ran into a motherly hug from the woman who had adopted him as a family member of her own. "I can't wait!" he said when she finally released him.

"You know how to get onto the platform, dear?" Her eyes flickered over to the Marauders.

"I was told that I have to run as hard and as fast as I can at that post over there," he replied seriously, pointing at what he knew to be the wrong post. He was fighting laughter.

Molly spun. "Sirius Bartholomew Black! How could you possibly -" She stopped suddenly as she heard Harry's peals of laughter. "Harry James Evans! Did you just try to make me reprimand your godfather for something he didn't do?"

"Sounded like he succeeded, Mum!" Fred and George said in unison.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Molly, but I really wanted to get Sirius for that prank with the peanut butter and the water buffalo last week." She simply shook her head. "I really go over to *that* post and push my way through." This time he pointed at the right one.

"Can I go, Mum?" Ginny asked.

"Who'll keep Sienna company if you do?" Harry asked before Molly could say anything. "She can't go this year, and she's younger than you."

"But -" Ginny started to pout.

"I wouldn't trust anyone outside my family except for you and your parents to keep an eye on her and James," he said. He pulled her into a hug. "Seriously, Ginny, I wish you could too, but you've got to wait until next year. I promise to write to you when I can, though."

"Okay," she said. "It's just that everyone seems to be going except me."

"And me," Sienna said forcefully.

"That's the only thing that makes it bearable," Ginny said. "Let's all go through and see them off, okay?" The group headed over and Molly surreptitiously cast a Notice-Me-Not charm on their group. One by one they slid through.

"Bartholomew?" Harry heard Peter ask Remus just before they joined the rest of the group. "No wonder he didn't want to tell us." Harry snorted, letting Peter know that he hadn't been quiet enough for Harry not to hear him.

A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said Hogwarts Express, eleven o'clock. Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought-iron archway where the barrier had been, with the words Platform Nine and Three-Quarters on it.

Smoke from the engine drifted over the heads of the chattering crowd, while cats of every color wound here and there between their legs. Owls hooted to one another in a disgruntled sort of way over the babble and the scraping of heavy trunks.

The first few carriages were already packed with students, some hanging out of the window to talk to their families, some fighting over seats. Harry pushed his cart off down the platform in search of an

empty seat. He passed a round-faced boy who was saying, "Gran, I've lost my toad again."

"Oh, Neville," he heard the old woman sigh.

A boy with dreadlocks was surrounded by a small crowd.

"Give us a look, Lee, go on."

The boy lifted the lid of a box in his arms, and the people around him shrieked and yelled as something inside poked out a long, hairy leg.

Harry pressed on through the crowd until he found an empty compartment near the end of the train. He motioned to Ron and the twins, but they had already found their friends and were heading to join them, but didn't get away from Molly in time, who wanted a photograph of them all waiting for the train. "I've done this for every child's first trip, so you get to be part of it too, Harry. You're as much family as Ron is."

"Oi, there's a problem there, Ronniekins," George quipped. "Mum says you're not family."

Harry shuddered slightly, but looked up when he heard George's cry of "Oof!" He looked up to see Fred retracting his elbow from George's midsection.

"Sorry about that, Harry," George said apologetically. "I didn't think. You are like another brother to us." His eyes twinkled. "Much to Ginny's annoyance, mind you."

"Hey!" Ginny squealed, turning a bright red as Harry looked at her with his eyebrows raised.

"You want to be my girlfriend?" he asked. She went even more red than he thought possible. He smiled. "You haven't answered my question." Her eyes widened when she realised what he was asking, and she squeed and leapt at him, hugging him tightly. "Can I take that as a yes?" he asked, laughing.

He climbed on the train with Ron after hugging everyone goodbye, and they made their way to the compartment. They talked as if they hadn't been seeing each other all summer, as if they had years to catch up on, as only young boys both excited and scared to be heading off to a new school can do.

Around twelve-thirty a smiling, dimpled woman came with the food trolley, and Harry proceeded to follow Marauder advice - "Buy at least one of everything off the cart. It's a long enough ride. Enjoy it."

They sat munching pumpkin pasties and Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans and Cauldron Cakes and even Chocolate Frog cards ("Darn, still no Agrippa!" exclaimed Ron.) when the door opened and the round-faced boy stepped into the compartment. "Have you seen my toad?" he asked in a worried voice. "He keeps getting away from me!"

Harry shook his head in the negative, and the boy headed off to check elsewhere. Harry picked up the last of the frogs and looked at the card. "Hey, I finally got a Dumbledore!" He flipped it and read the back.

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

CURRENTLY HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS

Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

"I've got about six of him. I wish I'd known you were looking for him. Got any Agrippa's in your collection?"

"Not yet. Got a picture of Morgana that I didn't before, though." He showed it to Ron, who nodded.

"Kinda feel sorry for that guy who keeps losing his toad. I've just got a boring old rat. Just sort of sits there, y'know?"

"Hedwig is new. Sirius got her for me." The conversation slid back into other things for a while before the door opened again to show the round faced boy and a girl already in her Hogwarts robes.

"Has anyone seen a toad? Neville's lost his." She had a bossy sort of voice, bushy brown hair, and noticeably large front teeth.

"We still haven't seen him, Neville," Harry said. "Sorry." He pulled out his wand and polishing kit.

"Are you going to do magic? Let's see it then," she said, sitting down in the compartment with them.

Ron snorted softly, earning him a dirty look from the girl. Harry replied, "Well, I was going to polish my wand before we arrived, although it's still light out, so we've got some time to go. But sure, I'll cast something. What do you want to see?"

"Well, he's got a smudge on his nose. Can you clean it off?"

Harry laughed. "Well, I can cast *Scourgify*, but I don't think that Ron wants his face stripped off. How about *Lavo*?" Ron shook his head violently.

"The way you cast? I'll be soaked!"

"All right then, scaredy-cat. *Emundo Ronald!*" Ron sparkled for a moment before the spell finished, and he sat before them cleaner than he'd even been that morning after his bath.

"I've not seen that one in the Grade One spellbook," she sniffed. "I've tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked for me. Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard - I've learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough - I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?" She said all this very fast, and Harry wondered if she'd breathed at all during it.

"This is Ron Weasley, the guinea pig for Mum's spell, and I'm Harry Evans. The spell was created by my Mum. It's brilliant for cleaning my room."

Her eyes widened. "Are you really Harry Evans?" said Hermione. "I know all about you, of course - I got a few extra books, for background reading, and you're in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century."

Harry snorted. "And I'm betting most of it is wrong, too. No one interviewed Mum or me or Sirius. Peter and Remus would have said something as well, so they asked people who don't know anything about me I'll bet."

Hermione looked scandalised that a book could possibly be wrong. She looked at Harry as if he were Satan himself for a moment before exiting the compartment with Neville behind her.

"I think she trusts her books too much," Ron said. "She looked as if you'd told her that day was night and night day when you said that they probably got everything about you wrong."

"Bet you a Sickle she's in Ravenclaw," Harry replied.

"Sucker bet," Ron laughed. He frowned quickly. "I lose no matter what, though. If I don't end up in Gryffindor, Mum and Dad will be disappointed, even though I'll get what comes out to a 'we still love you' speech, but if I do end up in Gryffindor, I've got five brothers to live up to." He paused. "Well, three." Harry laughed as he thought of anyone holding the twins up as people to be emulated.

"Ron, I've known you for how long? I'll make you a promise right now – if you end up anywhere other than Gryffindor, I'll quit. No questions asked, and I'll deal with Mum on my own."

Ron's eyes went wide, but he smiled suddenly. "Then I'll just have to end up in Gryffindor, won't I? The only thing scarier than Mum in a temper is *your* Mum in a temper." Then, changing subject as young boys are wont to do, he said, "Hey, did you have a chance to read the

Prophet today? Someone tried to rob one of Gringotts' high security vaults!"

"Really? What happened to them?"

"Nothing, that's why it's such big news. They haven't been caught. My dad says it must've been a powerful Dark wizard to get round Gringotts, but they don't think they took anything, that's what's odd. 'Course, everyone gets scared when something like this happens in case You-Know-Who's behind it."

Harry scowled. "I've been wondering. They talk about how I killed Voldemort when I was fifteen months old. Why are they worried about him being behind this robbery? If he's dead, then how can he have anything to do with it?"

Ron opened his mouth to respond when the logic of the statement struck him, and he closed his mouth just as quickly.

It was at that point that someone else came to the door. "Fitting, I'd say. The Bastard making friends with the Pauper. You've made the wrong sort of friends, Evans."

"Oh forgive me, great master!" Harry said in an over the top voice that left no doubt as to his mocking of Draco. "I have forgotten to petition Your Excellency for the right to choose my friends! Whatever shall I do? I shall live in disgrace forever!" He straightened up and added in a normal tone, "Or I could do the intelligent thing and pay as much attention to you as you deserve." A quick shove threw Malfoy from the compartment, and before he could get back in, Harry had slammed the door shut.

Ron just chuckled. "Loved that 'Oh forgive me, great master' stuff there. Where do you come up with that?"

"Mum is friends with Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and Remus Lupin. She was married to James Potter. The four of them are rather famous in Hogwarts history."

"Really? Who?" Ron asked.

"Ever hear of a group called the Marauders?" Harry asked with a chuckle.

"Fred and George talk about them as if they were gods. You mean to tell me -"

"Yup. The four of them don't hang out together any more, unfortunately. There's a slight bone of contention amongst them. James chased Uncle Remus out of the house for something to do with me years ago, and both Uncle Peter and Uncle Sirius left with him." He shrugged. With a sudden grin, he said, "Those two love knowing something and lording it over you, right? Let's see how long we can keep that little titbit of information secret from them." Ron grinned an evil grin.

The door popped open again to show Hermione Granger once more, this time without Neville in tow. "I've just been to the front of the train. They say we'll be in the station in just a few minutes. You need to get your robes on!"

"Mind letting us change, then?" Ron asked with some asperity, although Harry mused that he likely wouldn't even know what the word meant.

"All right -- I only came in here because people outside are behaving very childish, racing up and down the corridors," said Hermione in a sniffy voice.

"We're children," Harry said simply. "What do you expect?"

Hermione pressed her lips together tightly. "It's times like this that I hate the cut-off date for Hogwarts. If your birthday isn't by today, then you have to wait until next year. I should already have been a student here for a year, but because I was born on the nineteenth, I'm older than the rest of my classmates."

"Sorry about that," Harry said honestly. "My sister Sienna's going to be annoyed by that, then. Her birthday is Halloween." He thought for a moment. "Maybe Mum can do something about that."

“What would your mother have to say about it?” Hermione asked, both annoyed and intrigued.

“She's taken a job at Hogwarts this year,” he replied. “Maybe she can gain the ear of someone important.” He shrugged. “Or maybe she can pull a Malfoy and get Sienna allowed in early.”

“Pull a Malfoy'?” she asked.

“Yeah. The Malfoys were rather openly on the side of Moldieshorts ...” he paused in amusement at her reaction to his insulting name for the dark wizard, “... and when he either Went Away or decided to spend the last ten years naked, they suddenly decided that they'd been bewitched by the Duck Lord and threw themselves upon the mercy of the courts.” He snorted. “After proper amounts of cash had passed hands, they were declared clean.”

“Duck Lord'? 'Went Away'? 'Spent the last ten years naked'?” she asked, almost apoplectic. “Have you no respect for history? Aren't you afraid of his followers?”

“No. At least not in this specific case. I lived it, and we lost a particularly wonderful house elf because of it, I'm told. Moldie came in, fired something at me, and they found his robes on the floor. No one would have dared to wear robes similar, because he'd have tortured them to death if he were feeling kind. Either his body died that day, or he suddenly decided to become a naturist and run the world naked. I'm strongly doubting the second choice, myself. As for his followers? They'll do what they'll do. I've not been attacked yet.”

“Isn't that arrogance?” she asked, now simply intrigued.

“No, it's a fact. I've not been attacked except for verbally. I'm a bastard of some Death Eater – that's common knowledge. Only gits like Malfoy think that it's an insult. It's fact is all.”

“Why not do a test to find out who your father is? There must be a spell for it.”

“Not yet. The Muggle ones won't work because the father would be a pure-blood, and I can just see him saying that anything Muggle is

worthwhile," he said sarcastically. "The best of the Pureblood families see Muggles as quaint." He looked at Ron significantly with that statement. "So, Mum is going to work on a spell to announce patern ... pater ... darn, pater means father; what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Paternity," Hermione said with assurance.

"Yes! Thank you!" Harry said. "Paternity. She'll create a spell to test for paternity. Who the mother is, well that's usually fairly obvious," he finished with a chuckle.

"You think?" she answered with her own small laugh.

"And as for being the oldest in our class – well, someone has to be. Why not you?"

She frowned. "I'm not sure that I like your irreverence. But you're right. Maybe I can be a role model for the other first years." She looked around. "Well, I need to get back to my compartment. We'll see each other again. Maybe we'll even be in the same House."

"Could be," Harry said. "See you inside."

As she headed forward, a man's voice echoed out through the train, "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

He and Ron shrugged at each other, although Ron was looking distinctly white beneath his freckles. "Hey, they've graduated students here for a thousand years," Harry said. "Don't believe the twins with their troll wrestling story. How many eleven year old kids do you think can fight a troll and win?" Ron nodded at him and colour began to return to his face. They crammed their pockets with the last of the sweets and joined the crowd thronging the corridor.

The train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way toward the door and out on to a tiny, dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Harry heard a familiar voice: "Firs' years! Firs' years over here! All right there, Harry?" Harry grinned and gave Hagrid a thumbs-up gesture.

Hagrid's big hairy face beamed over the sea of heads.

“C'mon, follow me -- any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!”

Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep, narrow path. It was so dark on either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville, the boy who kept losing his toad, sniffed once or twice.

“Yeh'll get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec,” Hagrid called over his shoulder, “jus' round this bend here.”

There was a loud “Ooooooh!”

The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

“No more'n four to a boat!” Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. Harry and Ron were followed into their boat by Neville and Hermione.

“Everyone in?” shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself. “Right then -- FORWARD!”

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

“Heads down!” yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbour, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

“Oy, you there! Is this your toad?” said Hagrid, who was checking the boats as people climbed out of them.

“Trevor!” cried Neville blissfully, holding out his hands. Then they clambered up a passageway in the rock after Hagrid's lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, oak front door. “Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?” When he received complete silence from the crowd of students, Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there. She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross.

“The first years, Professor McGonagall,” said Hagrid.

“Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here.”

She pulled the door wide. The entrance hall was so big you could have fit the whole of Number twelve Grimmauld Place in it – all the stories. Including the basement. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones at Gringotts, the ceiling was too high to make out, and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right -- the rest of the school must already be here -- but Professor McGonagall showed the first years into a small, empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” said Professor McGonagall. “The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room.

“The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has

produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honour. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting."

"How do they sort us?" a nervous blonde girl asked. "My parents just laughed when I asked."

"I heard that we have to fight a troll!" someone else cried out.

"Sounds like a common story," Harry whispered to Ron. "Sirius told me something about making up a song and having to sing in front of the rest of the school, but he's been known to lie before."

Professor McGonagall returned shortly and led them into the Great Hall. The light was dim in the room, making it difficult for the new students to see their fellow upper year classmates. Harry looked upward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard Hermione whisper, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in *Hogwarts, A History*." To look at it, it was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, and that the Great Hall didn't simply open on to the heavens.

Harry quickly looked down again as Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard's hat, which was patched and frayed and extremely dirty. Harry felt a little uncertain about putting that thing on his head. *Merlin knows what I'll walk away from it with.* He shuddered.

The Hat suddenly developed a rip in it and began to sing. Harry just blinked at for a moment, trying very hard not to laugh at the utterly silly image that was being presented. He managed to catch his mother's eye at the head table, and she was smiling, having recognised the look on his face.

Eventually the song was done extolling its own virtues and giving what Harry thought was a particularly simplistic view of the Houses. Professor McGonagall stepped forward with a long scroll and began to read names off the list.

“Abbott, Hannah!”

A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. A moments pause, and then -

“HUFFLEPUFF!” shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

“Bones, Susan!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!” shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

“Boot, Terry!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

“Brocklehurst, Mandy!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

“Brown, Lavender!”

“GRYFFINDOR!”

“Bulstrode, Millicent!”

“SLYTHERIN!”

“Crabbe, Vincent!”

“SLYTHERIN!”

“Evans, Harry!”

As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like little hissing fires all over the hall.

“Evans, did she say?”

“THE Harry Evans?”

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him. Next second he was looking at the black inside of the hat. He waited.

Suddenly he heard a voice ringing through the Great Hall, “Why must you send them to me out of order? Is there no one between Crabbe and Potter?”

“I am not a Potter,” Harry growled at it, unaware that he was speaking aloud.

“Don't you tell me my business, whipper-snapper. You're a Potter, make no bones about it.”

“Pardon the language, but like hell I am! Just ask *him!*”

“Doesn't know what he's talking about, I'm sure of it. Now get back in line and come at your proper time.”

Harry took the hat off. “You're insane, you stupid hat! James Potter is very loud about my not being his son. If you won't to sort me at the proper time, then I refuse to stay here. You can wait for next year to sort a damned Potter.” He threw it roughly at the stool, missing it completely, and stalked toward the doors.

“Mister Potter, you will stop right now!” Professor McGonagall barked out.

He did, and turned around. “With all due respect, ma'am, I won't stay here and let that ... what did Sirius call it ... oh yes, 'that insane piece of haberdashery' humiliate and embarrass me. If it won't sort me when it's supposed to, then it won't sort me.”

"You will be sorted, or you won't attend this school," she said, her face taking on the identical look to Hermione's from the train.

He stared at her for a long moment. "Bye," he said and stalked from the room.

"Arrogant little bastard," was the last thing he heard from the room, in a voice he recognised quite well as that of his second greatest detractor – James Potter VI.

Had he been larger, his footsteps would have thundered down the hallway as he headed toward the entrance hall. Instead, they simply were the determined footsteps of an offended eleven year old. He turned a corner and literally ran into Hagrid.

"Ere now, where ya goin'?" the gentle giant asked.

"Stupid hat has decided it knows more about my past than anyone else in my family, and has decided that I will be sorted as a Potter. Probably because my name's been on the books since I was born, when I was a Potter, at least by name." He growled, a not very scary thing coming from an eleven year old whose voice had not yet changed. "I'm an Evans, and I'm proud of that! My Mum is proud of me, and her parents are too! So why must that hat humiliate me in front of the rest of the school by giving that man the chance to publicly deny me yet again?"

"Man's an idiot if he can't see what's in front of his eyes. You're James Potter's son – anyone lookin' at yer can tell that. Yer Potter's spittin' image, 'ceptin' for the eyes. Those're yer Mum's."

Harry looked at Hagrid like he was only mildly insane. Feet came running down the hall and Harry turned to see Lily running toward him. "Sorry, Mum," he mumbled. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. That hat made me so angry, though! Giving Father a public forum to insult me again. I won't be sorted out of order, Mum. That humiliates me just as much as that thing that the hat did in there. If they've moved on, then I'm leaving, even if it means that you disown me." He paused. "Won't be the first in the family to do it."

"It wasn't an official disowning, Harry." There were tears in her eyes.

"The only reason it wasn't, Mum, is because he need me to be seventeen to make it more humiliating. He hates me that much." He looked over at the stacks of trunks and such things, and quickly located his own. He began to pull his from the wall.

"You may find it hard to believe, Mr. Potter, but the Sorting has not continued," Professor McGonagall said, having managed to approach silently. "Both your mother and the headmaster have had a rather ... spirited discussion with the hat. If you do not return to be Sorted, no other students will be."

His eyebrows rose and he looked to his mother. "It's true. The headmaster told the Hat that no one was to be sorted until it sorted you properly." Much quieter she added, "He doesn't hate you, Harry."

"No, he just likes to humiliate me publicly."

They re-entered the hall and all eyes looked to him. "Are you through with your ... scene?" James Potter asked from the table. Harry just looked at him darkly before sitting down on the stool again.

"My apologies, Mr. Evans," the hat said aloud. "I may be a Thinking Cap, but I am not perfect when it comes to personal histories. You are in the rolls as a Potter."

"Hmm," the voice said in his ear. "This will be difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. You'd make an excellent Gryffindor. Not a bad mind either, so Ravenclaw would do well by you. There's talent, and a nice thirst to prove yourself - now that's interesting...So where shall I put you?"

Not Slytherin, he thought at the hat.

"Not Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that."

And I'd prove that bastard at the table right. You say that I'd make an excellent Gryffindor? Put me there, then. Not only would it make Mum happy, but it would drive James Potter insane. I want to prove to him that I can be a good Gryffindor.

“A very Slytherin attitude. You'll be one to watch, no doubt about that. And a word of advice – don't give up on the Potters.”

What do you mean?

“Nothing more than that as advice. Don't give up on James Potter. Well, since the decision has been made, I'd best tell everyone else that you're a Gryffindor!” The last word was spoken so that the hall could hear it.

He hopped down from the stool and strode to the Gryffindor table with determination, sitting down as the Weasleys pounded him on the back, the twins congratulating him for making the most interesting Sorting they had ever seen. He watched as Finch-Fletchley, Justin was Sorted into Hufflepuff, and then watched with curiosity as Granger, Hermione was called. She ran to the stool and slid the hat down over her head. It paused for a long moment before finally calling out “Gryffindor!” She ran happily to the table and sat next to Harry.

“I did it! I wanted to be in this House and it put me here!” She paused. “That was a brave thing you did, standing up for yourself like that in front of the whole school.”

“To heck with brave,” Harry said. “I was angry. Here the stupid hat was trying to tell me something that we *know* is wrong. I wasn't going to stand for it.” Talking to her, he missed Longbottom, Neville being Sorted into Gryffindor until he came and sat near them. In surprisingly short order the final four were Sorted: Thomas, Dean into Gryffindor, Turpin, Lisa into Ravenclaw, Weasley, Ronald into Gryffindor, and Zabini, Blaise into Slytherin. “What kind of name is Blaise for a boy?” Harry murmured to Hermione as he watched the black boy with the Asian features head to join his Slytherin classmates.

Albus Dumbledore stood as Zabini sat down, beaming at the students, his arms wide in welcome, as if the greatest thing he had ever seen was that all the students were in that room. “Welcome,” he said. “Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you!” He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not.

The meal went well, with small conversations surrounding him, such as Seamus and Neville talking about their families, and an overheard one between Percy and Hermione about classes. Harry took a look up at the head table, working his way down. At the end nearest him sat Hagrid, who caught his eye and gave him the thumbs up. Harry grinned back. In the center of the High Table, in a large gold chair, sat Albus Dumbledore. Next to him on his right was Harry's mother, and James Potter was on Dumbledore's left. Lily smiled warmly at her son. Further down the table, Harry saw a man with a rather large purple turban talking to a man with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin.

It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past the purple turban straight into Harry's eyes - and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry's forehead. "Ng!" Harry grunted in pain.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked suddenly, in unison with Percy.

"Just a sudden pain in this old scar. Man, that hurt!" he said, shaking his head. "Who's the teacher talking to the guy in the turban?"

"The one with the turban is your Defense professor, Professor Quirrell," Percy replied self-importantly. "The teacher with him is Professor Snape. He teaches Potions." Harry watched him for a while more, but Professor Snape did not look in his direction again.

After the dinner and desserts had been and gone, the headmaster stood once more. "Ahem -- just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you. First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well." Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins. "I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors. Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Professor James Potter. And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry laughed, but he was one of the few who did. Eyes widening, he asked Percy, "He's not serious?"

"I think he must be," said Percy, frowning at Dumbledore. "It's odd, because he usually gives us a reason why we're not allowed to go somewhere -- the forest's full of dangerous beasts, everyone knows that. I do think he might have told us prefects about the third floor, at least."

Harry shrugged. He found himself getting quite tired, and was looking forward to becoming well acquainted with the bed that he would be using for the next ten months. The students all were led from the hall, and very shortly Harry was able to begin what he hoped would be a long and pleasant relationship with the bed that he would use for the next seven years while at Hogwarts.

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At breakfast the next morning, Harry was given his schedule. The course load might be difficult at first, or it might not be. He was fairly certain that he'd be ahead of most of the other first years, if only because of what he had learned being around four people who used magic in their everyday lives (and that ignored the illicit lessons that Sirius and Peter were giving him). He wondered what it would be like to have his mother as a teacher, and being forced to call her Professor Evans.

His schedule was interesting – midnights on Wednesdays for Astronomy; three times a week to play in the dirt in Herbology; Charms with his mother on Thursdays.

Then there was Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall. Harry had been quite right to think she wasn't a teacher to cross. Strict and clever, she gave them a talking-to the moment they sat down in her first class.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Then she changed her desk into a pig and back again. They were all very impressed and couldn't wait to get started, but soon realized they weren't going to be changing the furniture into animals for a long time. After taking a lot of complicated notes, they were each given a match and started trying to turn it into a needle. By the time the lesson ended, only two students had shown any progress in the task – Hermione Granger and Harry himself, both making the match silver, Hermione's even had a point. Hermione scowled slightly at Harry.

When they had finished the class, Harry pulled her aside. "What's wrong, Hermione? You looked at me like I was the devil or something."

She scowled deeper before relenting. "I've always pushed myself, and it would have been nice to be the only one to do it. After all the things I overheard on the train?"

"Mudblood, by a certain sharp-chinned blonde idiot?" She nodded. "Think of it this way. The only two students in that class who had any success were The Boy Who Didn't Die Although No One Knows Why, who everyone expects to do interesting things even if his father was a Death Eater, and the Muggleborn student, whom so many think shouldn't even be able to do magic. I'm expected to do things special. You struck a blow for Muggleborns everywhere in the school by being normal and being best." He snorted. "My girlfriend Ginny is going to love hearing the stuff that's happened so far during the school year." Hermione's face went slightly blank at that comment, but Harry didn't really see that.

All the students had looked forward to Defense Against the Dark Arts, but it turned out to be quite the disappointment. The classroom stank of garlic, the rumour being that he had annoyed a vampire in Romania and the garlic was to keep the pesky fellow away from him. His turban, he told them, had been given to him by an African prince as a thank-you for getting rid of a troublesome zombie, but they weren't sure they believed this story. For one thing, when Seamus Finnigan asked eagerly to hear how Quirrell had fought off the zombie, Quirrell went pink and started talking about the weather; for another, they had noticed that a funny smell hung around the turban,

and the Weasley twins insisted that it was stuffed full of garlic as well, so that Quirrell was protected wherever he went.

Friday was set for double Potions with the Slytherins. Harry had heard rumours from several places, including his three uncles and even James Potter about what kind of a person Professor Snape was, and it was disheartening to say the very least. The only good thing about his first Friday was that he'd gotten an invitation from Hagrid to come visit him in the afternoon, since he knew that Harry had off.

At the start-of-term banquet, Harry had gotten the idea that Professor Snape disliked him. By the end of the first Potions lesson, he knew he'd been wrong. Snape didn't dislike Harry -- he hated him.

Chapter 5

Potions lessons took place down in one of the dungeons. It was colder here than up in the main castle, and would have been quite creepy enough without the pickled animals floating in glass jars all around the walls. Snape read his way through the class rolls, and paused when he reached Harry's name. "Ah, Harry Potter, our newest - celebrity."

"Evans, sir," Harry said.

"Five points from Gryffindor for correcting a Professor with incorrect information."

"I will not answer to Potter, sir. I am not a Potter, nor will I ever be. I am an Evans."

"That is another ten points from Gryffindor for your cheek, Potter." He finished calling the roll and looked up at the class. His eyes were as black as Hagrid's were, but carried none of the warmth deep within them that Hagrid's held. They were cold and empty, as if there once had been a soul within that body, but it had fled for a more welcome home.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking," Snape began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word - like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses ... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death - if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

More silence followed this little speech. Harry and Ron exchanged looks with raised eyebrows. Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn't a dunderhead.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

"If you don't add it at just the right time, a reason for Mr. Filch to scrape you off the walls. When done right, you get part of something called the Draught of the Living Death. And it's Evans, sir."

"How about this, Potter – where would you get a bezoar from?"

Harry just crossed his arms and sat back in his seat. He'd answered the last question he was going to from this professor, until he began to call him by his rightful name.

"Answer me, Potter," Snape said. "Or are you merely proving that the first answer was a fluke?" At Harry's further stony silence, he smiled an evil smile and said, "Well, since you aren't intelligent enough to know that it comes from the stomach of a goat, perhaps you can tell me the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Harry continued to stare at Snape, his arms crossed. No sound passed his lips. "Dunderheads, they send me dunderheads," Snape muttered. "For your silent impudence, another ten points. Amazing, Potter – the school year is barely started and you've already lost your house twenty-five points. Especially for not knowing that they are the same plant, also known as aconite."

Things certainly didn't improve for the Gryffindors as the Potions lesson continued. Snape put them all into pairs and set them to mixing up a simple potion to cure boils. He swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like. He was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus's cauldron into a twisted blob, and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's shoes. Within seconds, the whole class was standing on their stools while Neville, who had been drenched in the potion when the cauldron collapsed, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?"

Neville whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose.

"Take him up to the hospital wing," Snape spat at Seamus. Then he rounded on Harry and Ron, who had been working next to Neville.

"You - Potter - why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another five points you've lost for Gryffindor."

"There's no one in this classroom named Potter, Professor, so Potter couldn't have helped Neville in any way. As for *me*, I didn't because you've made it quite obvious that you would dock points if we tried to help a fellow student."

Harry found quickly that puce was apparently a colour that the human body was never intended to be. Snape's long bony finger came to rest under Harry's nose. "Fifty points for your outright lying to a professor, Potter! Plus a week's worth of detentions with me starting Sunday, and another week with Filch after I am done with you."

"That's patently unfair!" Hermione shouted.

"Shut up, mudblood!" someone from the Slytherin side of the classroom called out. Someone being quite obviously Draco Malfoy.

Before anyone could stop him, Harry's wand was out and a beam of neon pink belched from his wand, striking Malfoy. The result caused everyone in the classroom to snort in laughter, even the professor, although he covered it immediately. Draco Malfoy was now the same colour as the beam that had struck him. He was in a nauseating green tutu, and the first words from his mouth sounded as if he were sucking on a helium balloon. "How dare you!" Malfoy squeaked, sounding for all the world like an outraged hamster.

"Granger, another fifty points for back-talk. Potter, you are expelled from this class." With a smarmy smile he added, "and since this class is a requirement to pass beyond first year -"

With that, the class was dismissed.

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Harry took Ron and Hermione down with him to meet Hagrid. He'd only met the giant fellow once or twice, but he was the type who you couldn't help but like, he was so friendly. Harry caught a reference in the Daily Prophet about a break-in at Gringotts, but realised that it was probably best to say nothing about it to Hagrid, since the vault listed had been the one that Harry could remember Hagrid going to that day in August. Plus, he'd heard hints that the fellow had trouble keeping his mouth shut. At least the visit had calmed Ron and Hermione down somewhat, and Harry just smiled through the entire recap of the Potions lesson.

The three of them walked back to the castle and were met by a number of sixth and seventh year Gryffindors, to judge by their robes.

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Lily came skidding into the Hospital Wing and ran over to Madam Pomfrey. "What happened?"

"Well, the Granger girl won't say, or can't, and your son is still unconscious. Mister Weasley is grumbling about being a Gryffindor, so I'd say it has something to do with the one hundred and thirty points lost by your son and Miss Granger during Potions class today. No one is admitting to it, but it is my belief that some of the older students decided to be ruffians and beat up three eleven year olds."

"Find out, please, if you can," Lily said quietly. "I'll be talking with a few people about how two students can lose as many points in one class period as it usually takes an entire House to gain in six months." She stalked from the room and headed straight to the Headmaster's office. She was ushered in to find the rest of the teaching staff already there. "I forgot about the Friday meeting. Apologies. At the moment, I'm a little more worried about why my son is still unconscious in the infirmary. Care to explain, Severus? It likely has to do with the number of points removed from Gryffindor during your class today."

"It is not my fault if you have never bothered to train the brat to respect his elders. He continually disrespected me and outright refused to answer questions. He then attacked one of my Slytherins, which is when I expelled him from Potions. I will not be permitting that blasted Potter back into my class."

"Well, there's your problem right there, Snivellus," James growled from the corner. "I agree that he doesn't show proper respect, but let me ask something – did you continually call him Potter?"

"Of course I did, you fool. You still haven't improved your intelligence since our days as students."

"Nor have you, Snape," James barked back. "You were there for the boy's histrionics during the Sorting. Couldn't argue with him on it, to be honest. Damned hat wants to make that kid my son. But he was a little over the top, I think."

"As over the top as your father was in having legal papers drawn up to make sure that Harry can't possibly be in the line of the Potter succession?" Lily said. "I seem to recall you supporting that quite loudly. It's part of the reason that you simply *can't* insult Harry by calling him a bastard. He has had it drilled into him that it is a fact, and therefore not to be hidden."

James nodded, admitting the point. "He's an Evans, Snape. I'm betting that you demanded that he answer to Potter, when his legal surname is Evans, as your roll sheet would have told you. Lily has all the paperwork to prove it." He stood and loomed over the Potions professor. "I'll tell you this, though – if you're still teaching that class when my real son comes here, not to mention my daughter, and you treat *them* like I know you did the Evans boy, well, they'll never find your body. And I say that before witnesses."

"Enough," Albus Dumbledore said with some fatigue in his voice. "Insults and death threats are getting us nowhere."

"It wasn't a threat," murmured Potter.

"Yes, yes," Albus said, waving off James Potter's comment. "I had the rather unusual occurrence today of having certain information come

my way making me aware that a *first* year student would need to be expelled since he would be unable to finish a necessary curriculum for the school. Not having any prior knowledge of a student in such straits, I checked deeper. Severus, I am severely disappointed in you. You knew quite well that his name is Evans, since you were at the feast. As James also pointed out, it is on your roll sheet as well. Your removal of points was heavy handed and arbitrary. Most of the removed points came from Mr. Evans refusal to answer to a name that is not his, and the fifty that you removed from Miss Granger can only have been removed because she was telling the truth.” He sighed. “I have never liked to do this, but I fear that I must. After today’s performance, all points removed and given will be reviewed, no matter the House that is affected. Your punishments to Harry Evans will be vacated, and he will be permitted back into your class.” He paused. “Plus, you must apologise to him before the very class that you humiliated him before.”

Snape's eyes narrowed as he looked at Dumbledore, and then he finally relented, nodding sharply a single time. The rest of the meeting was quiet, but Severus Snape was looking decidedly uncomfortable with the looks that Lily Evans was shooting his way.

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“No.”

“Excuse me, young man?” Lily Evans asked in her dangerous 'Are you not minding me?' voice. “Did you just tell me that you aren't going to do something?”

“Yes, Mother, I did,” he replied angrily. “I am not returning to that Potions classroom. The professor hated me before, because he didn't listen at the Welcoming Feast, and wanted to slap me for being James Potter's son, I guess. Now he's being forced to admit that he was wrong. Do you really think that his attitude toward me will change at all? If anything, it will become worse, but in a way that he can't be taken to task for. I will be his whipping boy, much as I'm Father's father's abuse target of choice.”

“You've been listening to Sirius rant about the Black family too much,” she murmured. “That's almost verbatim Siri stuff.”

“Well, you tell me to listen to my elders. Uncle Sirius is older than me,” he replied impudently. He quickly became serious. “I think I'm right. I know that I may only be eleven, but I've seen a lot in the past few years. I've grown up more than I want just from being treated as the bastard saviour. I'm the good guy who destroyed the evil dark wizard when I was only a year old, but I'm also a leper, because I don't know who my father is, and Father and his father made quite certain that the world knew about that.” He paused. “Is there something else I can call him? He's not my father, and Professor Potter is just for school. Sir? Mr. Potter? I think that the other name is right out.”

“I don't know, Harry. It might be a conversation to take up with him, to be honest. We're getting away from the point, though. Severus has agreed to apologise to you in front of the class that he humiliated you before. The points have been restored, and everything is basically back to normal.”

“Except for the fact that I was beaten up by my own House. As Uncle Remus would say it, 'I was rendered unconscious by my fellow Gryffindors.' So I know I can't trust them. Ron and Hermione were beaten by them as well, and can't really say anything if they want to have a comfortable time in the dorms. The 'no snitching' rule that all Houses have.” He paused. “Let me put the whole thing to you this way, Mum. I have a teacher who hates me, at first because he thought I was James Potter's son, and now because he's been overruled. He will be embarrassed when he has to apologise publicly. This will not be doing anything to make him want to be fair to me, since he's already shown that he can't be trusted to be fair. Does my refusal to return to his class make sense? He won't let me pass anyway, so I might as well be expelled now.”

Lily thought for a very long moment before saying, “I wish I could argue, but I know him from my own school days. I'll work something out with the Headmaster.” She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “I love you, Harry. Never forget that.”

“I can't, Mum,” he replied, smiling. “You tell me every day.”

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Harry re-entered the Gryffindor tower to the sound of silence. "Um, hi?" he said in a very questioning one. One of the twins snorted and came over to him.

"Welcome back, Harry. We Weasleys are trying to figure out what to do to the Slytherins in disguise that assaulted you, since no real Gryffindor would ever have done such a thing," Fred said dangerously. They might only be third year students, but they had already developed a name around the school for their pranking.

"I think what's going to happen to them when the Headmaster figures out who they are is more than enough," Hermione said with some serious anger.

"What *will* happen?" Harry asked.

Percy spoke up. "When the perpetrators of this dastardly and cowardly assault are found, they will be immediately ejected from the school and forbidden to take their N.E.W.T.s at a bare minimum, while having their wands snapped is also possible, and even likely, since you *were* beaten to unconsciousness."

Harry scowled. "Hmm, I'm not sure I like that. I think I need to talk to the Headmaster and our Head of House."

George spoke up. "Why? They deserve to pay for it." His eyes flickered to a corner of the common room.

"They got angry and did something blindingly stupid in the heat of the moment. Should they have their ability to get a job destroyed?"

"Yes!" Hermione yelled. "I want them to pay!"

"I understand, but let's go talk to the Headmaster, and I'll see if I can convince you around to my way of thinking, okay?" He turned. "Coming, Ron?" The three of them exited again.

"I can't believe that you're thinking of protecting them!" Hermione seethed at him.

“Who said anything about protecting them? I am, however, thinking about the fact that if I can manage to save their school careers, they'll *know* that they owe me. And I'm not against using that at a later time in my life.”

Hermione came to a stop in the hallway. She stared at him for a long moment, and he began to get uncomfortable – there was an odd look entering her eyes that he couldn't place. She finally shook her head and smoothed her robes across her chest and linked arms with Harry. “Well, let's go talk to the Headmaster and see if we can save some school careers.”

Ron laughed. “I've thought it before, Harry, and I'll now say it to you. You're scary. Brilliant, but scary.” He looked at Hermione. “She's got you all beat, though.”

“I hope you're talking about being brilliant, Ron,” Harry said with a chuckle.

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Dinner that night was a bit raucous, since all three of the attacked students were back at the Gryffindor table, enjoying their meal. When the meal was finally finished, the Headmaster stood. “I have an announcement before you head off to your dormitories and the like. Due solely to pleading on the part of the assaulted students, I am announcing that the perpetrators will not be expelled. They will be losing several privileges, but they will be able to stay as students and take their N.E.W.T.s. Were it not for the eloquent request and extremely forgiving nature of the three, it is likely that once caught, the attackers would have been expelled, with their wands snapped.” This was not the voice of the jovial crackpot that they had heard at the Welcoming Feast. This was the voice of a man in command. “We are about to speak with the students in question, since we do in fact know who they are, but their punishments would be far less severe were they to approach their Head of House and turn themselves in.”

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Dear Ginny,

Well, this was an interesting first week or so here at Hogwarts. I've been in an argument over my Sorting (I'd tell you about it, but it's apparently a tradition that no student should enter the school knowing how the Sorting takes place) and in an argument with my Potions professor.

Actually, I should say 'my EX-Potions professor'. As much as I wish that it were the teacher that were 'ex-', it's just the class. I got expelled from the class for being right and refusing to back down. Snape has to apologise to me publicly.

Needless to say, I'm not returning to class. I've been told that I have to, but I've also explained why I won't. Mum is trying to work something out, but we'll see what happens.

Made a new friend as well. Her name is Hermione Granger. (No, don't go being jealous. You're my girlfriend, and that's that.) She's a bossy thing, but I've discovered that she has a particularly evil streak to her. That's evil as in 'Fred and George/Marauders' evil, not 'naked Dark Lord prancing in the woods' evil. I think you'll like her, although she'll likely make you study like crazy.

One week here and I find that I really need to get some pranking done. There was an incident that I'd imagine you've heard of by now, and it's come to my attention that some people really need to be pranked properly. Fred and George are good at explosions and the more obvious sort of thing, but what we need is more subtle. Something that lets the person know that they've been gotten, but not with the risk of losing various body parts. (You must admit that it is a risk around those two. Remember how long it took your Mum to reattach their noses and buttocks when they had that accident?)

*Wish I had more to say, but it's only been a week. Miss you being around, if only because the homework load is so large already, and I'd really like to spread the misery. **laugh***

Looking forward to Christmas time, when I can see your family again.

Write back soon!

Harry

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The next morning, there was a notification that the Gryffindors and Slytherins would be having their first flying lesson on Thursday. Most of the Gryffindors were at least a little nervous, except for Ron and Harry, both who could remember some of the pick-up games of Quidditch during their earlier summers together. Neville and Hermione took it to new heights, however. Neville had never been on a broomstick in his life, because his grandmother had never let him near one. Privately, Harry felt she'd had good reason, because Neville managed to have an extraordinary number of accidents even with both feet on the ground. Hermione Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Neville was. This was something you couldn't learn by heart out of a book - not that she hadn't tried.

At three-thirty that afternoon, Harry, Ron, and the other Gryffindors hurried down the front steps onto the grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day, and the grass rippled under their feet as they marched down the sloping lawns toward a smooth, flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the forbidden forest, whose trees were swaying darkly in the distance.

The Slytherins were already there, and so were twenty broomsticks lying in neat lines on the ground. Harry had heard Fred and George Weasley complain about the school brooms, saying that some of them started to vibrate if you flew too high, or always flew slightly to the left.

Professor Potter stalked toward them, and Harry could see some of the other students stealing looks between himself and the teacher. "Well, what are you all waiting for?" he barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

Harry glanced down at his broom. It was old and some of the twigs stuck out at odd angles. The one at home was in better condition.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," he called out, "and say 'Up!' "

"UP!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did. Hermione Granger's had simply rolled over on the ground, and Neville's hadn't moved at all. Perhaps brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought Harry; there was a quaver in Neville's voice that said only too clearly that he wanted to keep his feet on the ground.

"Buggering thing," he heard Ron mutter. "Brooms at home at least respond to you immediately. This one had to think about it."

"Thank you for the commentary about the school brooms," said an amused Professor Potter. "Incidentally, I agree with you, but these are what the school supplies." He then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows correcting their grips. Harry and Ron were delighted when he told Malfoy he'd been doing it wrong for years.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," Professor Potter said. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle - three - two - " But Neville, nervous and jumpy and frightened of being left on the ground, pushed off hard before the whistle had even touched his lips.

"Come back down!" he shouted, but Neville was rising straight up like a cork shot out of a bottle - twelve feet - twenty feet. Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground falling away, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and -

WHAM - a thud and a nasty crack and Neville lay facedown on the grass in a heap. His broomstick was still rising higher and higher, and started to drift lazily toward the forbidden forest and out of sight.

Potter was bending over Neville, his face just as white as his student's.

"Broken wrist," Harry heard him mutter. "Come on, - it's all right, up you get."

He turned to the rest of the class. "None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where

they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, son." Harry felt a minor stab of pain at the kindness in the Professor's voice, even knowing that he wasn't actually claiming that Neville was his son.

As soon as the Professor was out of sight, Malfoy began to ridicule Neville. "Did you see how white that great lump was? Why are they even letting squibs in here?" the blonde boy drawled.

"Well, if they didn't, you'd have nowhere to get schooling, would you now?" Harry replied in a similar drawl.

Malfoy sneered and didn't respond. His eye caught something in the grass and he reached down and picked it up. "Look! It's that Remembrall that his grandmother sent him. I think it should be left somewhere for him. Perhaps on the top of the castle?" He mounted his broom and shot skyward.

Without a thought, Harry was in the air beside him. "Give it back," Harry said darkly.

"Or else what?" Malfoy replied fearlessly.

Harry's smile made Malfoy pale. "Your protectors aren't up here to save you, are they?"

Malfoy had just realised the same thing. "You want it, then catch it!" He faced the wall nearest them and threw the Remembrall as hard as he could at it before shooting to the ground as fast as he could.

Harry, on the other hand, flew at breakneck speed, trying to catch up to the flying sphere, unmindful of how fast he was approaching the castle walls, or that it was a window that he was approaching. With a mere two feet to go, he caught the ball and came to a stop mere inches from the wall. Without thinking, he pushed off from the wall and headed back to the ground by his fellow students.

When he reached the ground, he was greeted with the image of two different professors rushing toward him. McGonagall, her eyes wide, and Potter, with a smirking Malfoy in tow. "You're gone," Malfoy mouthed to Harry.

"Mister Potter!" McGonagall shouted. "Never - in all my time at Hogwarts - " She was almost speechless with shock, and her glasses flashed furiously, " - how dare you - might have broken your neck - "

"I thought I ordered you to stay on the ground!" Potter thundered. "You heard my warning and chose to flout the rules! Now you pay the penalty!"

"But Professor Potter -" Parvati Patil started to say.

"Silence!" both McGonagall and Potter bellowed. They looked at each other, and James Potter nodded to Professor McGonagall. "He's yours to deal with, Professor."

"Come with me, Evans," McGonagall said. Harry caught sight of Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle's triumphant faces as he left, and he said, "This isn't over, Malfoy. Not by a long shot."

"Silence," McGonagall said. "No threatening other students."

"That was no threat," Harry muttered under his breath. He followed in her wake as she stalked toward the castle, and was more than a little surprised to see her turn left at a corner where he knew they needed to turn right to reach the Headmaster's office.

She stopped outside a classroom, opened the door and poked her head inside. "Excuse me, Professor Evans, could I borrow Wood for a moment?"

A burly young man, a fifth year, came out of the class, looking more than slightly confused. "Follow me, you two," said Professor McGonagall, and they marched on up the corridor, Wood looking curiously at Harry.

"In here." She faced the two boys at each other. "Evans, this is Oliver Wood. Wood -- I've found you a Seeker."

Wood's expression changed from puzzlement to delight. "Are you serious, Professor?"

"Absolutely," said Professor McGonagall crisply. "The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Was that your first time on a broomstick, Potter?"

"No, but it was the first time I'd ever tried anything more than a few dives or rolls."

"He caught a hard-flung Remembrall in his hand after a fifty-foot dive," Professor McGonagall told Wood. "Didn't even scratch himself. Charlie Weasley couldn't have done it."

Wood was now looking as though all his dreams had come true at once. "Ever seen a game of Quidditch, Potter?" he asked excitedly.

"Wood's captain of the Gryffindor team," Professor McGonagall explained.

"He's just the build for a Seeker, too," said Wood, now walking around Harry and staring at him. "Light -- speedy -- we'll have to get him a decent broom, Professor -- a Nimbus Two Thousand or a Cleansweep Seven, I'd say."

"I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can't bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows, we need a better team than last year. Flattened in that last match by Slytherin, I couldn't look Severus Snape in the face for weeks..." Professor McGonagall peered sternly over her glasses at Harry. "I want to hear you're training hard, Potter, or I may change my mind about punishing you."

"Will the student who caused me to be in the air be punished, Professor? Malfoy had risen into the air to destroy Neville Longbottom's property, and I couldn't allow that. Ask any of the Gryffindors in the class, ma'am." He realised the tone he was taking and bowed his head. "I'm sorry, ma'am. That tone was uncalled for -- you did nothing to deserve it."

"Injustice sits harshly with you, I see," McGonagall said. "I'm glad to see that. I shall take up the matter with Professor Potter."

"Expect complaints that I wasn't expelled," he muttered softly.

"Yes, well, we shall deal with that," McGonagall replied, her crisp tone returning.

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"You're kidding!" Ron whispered. "You'd be the youngest Seeker in about -"

"Wood told me I'd be the youngest in a century. Must mean there was a first year with a birthday in August at some point playing Seeker. We want to keep it quiet, though. Spring it on the Slytherins in the first game."

As if the mention of the Gryffindor rivals had somehow been a summoning spell, Malfoy and his bodyguards showed up. "Eating a last meal, Potter?" Malfoy asked, stressing the last name.

"Enjoying it quite well up until a moment ago, Longbottom," Harry replied, stressing his last word as well. "I note that you're a lot braver when you have back-up. Not that they're smart enough to do anything more than look stupid."

"I'd take you on any time on my own," said Malfoy. "Tonight, if you want. Wizard's duel. Wands only - no contact." After a pause so short that Harry couldn't have responded had he wanted to, he added, "What's the matter? Never heard of a wizard's duel before, I suppose?"

Before Ron could speak as it was obvious that he was about to do, Harry spoke up, loud enough to be heard by the entire front table. "What an excellent idea, Malfoy! I'm sure that our fellow students would love to see a duel between 'friendly' opponents! Let's get a teacher involved, just to make sure it's fair!"

Before anyone could react, Harry had stood and walked to the front table. "Professors? Mister Malfoy has suggested a wands only duel. We'd need a faculty advisor for it, of course, but I'm agreeable, if there are no school rules against it. Obviously Mister Malfoy likes the idea, since he suggested it."

Lily looked at her son for a long moment, and he saw her eyes flicker toward Malfoy. From the small smile that crossed her lips, he was fairly certain that his nemesis was standing stock still, floundering, wondering how he'd lost control of the situation. "I'll oversee it, if there are no objections," she said. "Either Professor Sprout or myself would be best, as Heads of the other two Houses, so no complaints of unfairness could be raised." Her eyes flickered to Professor Snape, who was apparently trying to decide which colour best suited his face at the moment. Unfortunately for him, the current best answer was 'none of the above'.

Dumbledore looked at the students involved and at Lily. "I agree. The duel shall be set for Saturday at noon, after which lunch shall be served. The survivor of the duel will likely be lauded." Harry fought quite hard not to laugh at the twinkle he could see in the old man's eyes.

He turned to head back to the table and saw part of the reason for the twinkle. Although he was fighting to hide it, Malfoy was whiter than any of the Hogwarts ghosts.

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Fridays were quite quiet for Harry, since they had not yet been able to convince him to return to Snape's Potions class. He sent quick letters to both Ginny and Sirius about the upcoming duel and the way that he had outmanoeuvred Malfoy. He quickly received letters back that the Marauders would be there for it.

The duel approached quite quickly on Saturday, and Harry found that quite a few people were there. Someone who couldn't possibly be anyone other than Lucius Malfoy was in heated conversation with the Headmaster, while Harry found himself smothered by Molly Weasley, and then by each of the three Marauders in turn. He finally turned to face Ginny, who was blushing. "Glad they let you come," he said quietly. "I thought you'd like to see Malfoy get handed his hat." He hugged her and held her hand as they walked toward the platform where he and Malfoy would be duelling. Near it were Ron and Hermione, trying to figure out strategies for Harry to use. "Ginny," Harry said, breaking up the conversation, "I'd introduce you to my two

best friends, but you already know one of them. In fact, you continually warn me about him.” He laughed. “Here's my other friend. Hermione Granger, meet Ginny Weasley. Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger.” The two girls looked at each other for a moment before shaking hands quickly and letting go. Again, there was something odd happening with Hermione, but this time she'd gotten Ginny in on it as well.

Before he could begin to puzzle it out, the Headmaster mounted the platform and began to speak. “Due to the eagerness of some of our students to practice, a duel has been suggested by Mr. Draco Malfoy. Mr. Harry Evans has graciously accepted to duel with him.” His eyes sparkled, and a chuckle went through the crowd – the students knew the truth, and some were whispering it to their parents. “This will be a no contact duel, meaning that only spells will be permitted – contact between combatants will only be due to the result of a spell. It will be the best of three, and the combatants are fighting to disarm only.”

The two climbed onto the platform and faced each other. Harry did a proper bow, as opposed to Draco's barely noticeable one. “On the count of three – one – two -”

Draco had not waited for three. An ugly blue beam shot at Harry, which Harry neatly side-stepped while firing another spell at Draco's feet at the point when Dumbledore would have said three. Harry's spell appeared to do nothing, and Draco sneered at him. “As useless as you were in Potions, eh, Potter?”

“Whatever you say, Goyle,” Harry replied calmly. He then cast a simple Tickling Charm at Draco, who began to double over in laughter. As his feet moved apart as he changed his stance, they suddenly hit the spell that Harry had first cast, and those same feet shot out from underneath Draco, making him land hard on the platform. His wand flew from his grasp, and Harry picked it up.

“First round goes to Harry Evans,” Dumbledore intoned. “A brief rest for the two combatants, and then the next round will occur.” Harry walked to the group at his end and was pulled into a hug by Ginny.

“Why did you call him Goyle?” Molly Weasley asked.

"Because he thinks that it will anger me to call me a Potter. I wish I were a Potter. But I'm not. I am proud of the Evans name, and that was the reason I had eighty points pulled from Gryffindor, because I wouldn't knuckle under to Snape over there." He looked over and saw Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape giving Draco a serious talking to, and it did not look to be a tongue-lashing, from the intrigued look on the blonde's face.

"Expect something nasty. Snape looks like he's giving him some advice on what to cast," Sirius murmured to Harry.

"I expect nothing less than nasty from Mr. Bad Faith. And that name can actually apply to any of the three of them."

"It is time," Dumbledore intoned. "The count currently stands at one to zero, for Mr. Evans. Mr. Malfoy, I would caution you to wait until I have reached the count of three. If you do not, you will forfeit, even if you win the round. Do I make myself clear?" Draco nodded with a scowl, and then barely sketched a bow again in Harry's direction. Harry did not bow, instead preparing himself to fire a spell. Draco's eyes showed that he understood the insult.

As soon as the Headmaster reached three, Draco looked at Harry and screamed "SERPENTSORTIA!" A huge cobra exploded from the end of his wand and landed before Harry. Before Harry could do anything, sparks began to strike it from somewhere, angering it. He took his eyes from it for a moment to see Snape and Quirrell staring at the snake. Quirrell was staring as if the snake was his entire world, which it might well be, given the number of phobias the man seemed to have. Snape, on the other hand, was murmuring something under his breath as the sparks continued to strike the snake.

"*Protego*," Harry murmured, throwing a shield over the cobra. "I did not call you or strike you with sparks," he said. "Please calm down, and we'll see about getting you back to wherever you came from."

From nothingness I came, and to nothingness I will return. While I am here, however, I like pain as little as the next cobra.

"I need to stop whoever is doing the sparks. If I let you climb aboard me, will you promise not to bite me? I will find it easier to protect you that way."

The cobra looked at him for a long moment before pulling in its hood and slithering over to Harry, who knelt with his wand still trained toward Draco. The cobra climbed up his arm and around his neck. "Now, Malfoy," he said, and finally noticed the looks of shock and fear from everyone in the room. Only Dumbledore wasn't looking disturbed. He shrugged and cast a simple Summoning Charm to disarm Draco, winning the match with ease. He turned and walked off the end of the platform and found the crowd parting before him. He started to walk to Ginny, but she hid behind Molly, who was already acting as if she had a wand in her grasp. He turned toward Ron, who flinched slightly. There was not a face that looked sympathetic that he could see in his cursory glance about the crowd.

"I see," he said, and walked from the room.

He stormed to his dormitory room and began to pack everything up except the school supplies, since he was quite certain that he wouldn't need them any more. He lightened his trunk (a spell he wasn't supposed to know yet) and began to walk downstairs to leave.

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Lily blinked. *I should have said something, but I was just so shocked at the way that everyone just reacted to him! The Weasleys, for God's sake! They've known him for more than half his life!*

"Well, I need to go find my son, since I appear to be the only person in this school with any sense. He's a child, you morons!" She spun on Molly Weasley. "Don't come near us again, Mrs. Weasley. If this is how you treat a child that grew up treating you as a beloved Aunt, then we don't need you in our lives."

She stormed from the room, but heard James Potter say, "His father was a Death Eater, and that proves it! How else do you explain the fact that he speaks to snakes? Name me a Light wizard who could do that!"

Before she could turn around and lay into her ex-husband, she heard Albus say, "Merlin. If you read the scrolls he dictated before his death, he spoke to snakes quite often. They helped him with quite a bit of the foraging he did to survive during some of the more ... lean times he went through." The Headmaster sighed. "I am sorely disappointed in all of you. Especially you, Molly Weasley. You have known the boy for years. He has played with your children. And yet you reject him out of a sense of fear. Do not even attempt to speak to me, Sirius. I am most disappointed in those who declared themselves his surrogate parents." A pause. "Severus, a word with you, if you please." With that, she stormed away.

She found Harry near the entrance doors, carrying his trunk. "Leaving, I take it?"

"Does it do me any good to stay? Everyone who saw that thinks I'm something to be scared of now. Even Aunt ... no, even Mrs. Weasley is scared of me." He set the trunk down and sat down on it. "Even Sirius and Remus and Peter think the worst of me after that. Father must be right about me. I am evil. Just let me go, Mother. Just let me disappear and make everyone happier."

"I wouldn't be happier," she said.

"Yeah, but this time there's a real reason for me to leave." He began to cry softly, and she took him into her arms. "Why was I born this way, Mum? Why am I destined to turn evil? Why must I be forced to feel as if I'm one of the good guys, when we know now that it will never happen?" He broke into full sobs.

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The majority of the crowd winced as they saw the young man break down into tears. Dumbledore ended the projection on the wall and said, "Might I offer my congratulations to you all, especially those who pretended to be friends and family?" No one could ever remember hearing that tone of derision in his voice before. "Now, if you will excuse me, I need to go convince a young man that there is at least one other in this school who sees him as something worthwhile." He neared the doors before turning. "Someday James, you will see what

is already before your eyes, and regret the loss of this time, for you will never get it, or him, back.”

As the Headmaster left, Sirius turned suddenly and punched the stone wall as hard as he could. The sound of bone breaking was clear. Madam Pomfrey bustled over to help him, but he waved her off. “Sorry, Poppy. No can allow.” He growled. “Some surrogate father figure I am – I fell prey to the same damn bigotry that I was running from all those years ago!”

“How do you think I feel?” Remus asked. “I know what it is to be alone.”

Ginny was now crying against her mother, and Ron was looking dejectedly at the floor. Hermione looked lost. “Maybe I'm missing something,” she asked, “but how is it that the hissing he did to calm that snake makes him evil? Cobras only open their hood when they wish to attack. He calmed it down.” The reaction to her question meant that no one saw as a seventh year student sneaked out of the hall.

Lucius Malfoy spoke up. “Despite Headmaster Dumbledore's assertion, there is no evidence that Merlin was a parselmouth, which means that the only known parselmouths in history have all been dark wizards. Salazar Slytherin, for one, was a parselmouth, and he ended up fighting the other three Founders for possession of the school. Grindelwald is reported to have been one. You Know Who was also one. And now the child of a Death Eater is one. Perhaps his father was You Know Who himself, and he is beginning to come into his own as the heir?”

“Nice try, Lucy,” Sirius sneered. “Not all of us buy that 'I was under Imperius' crap that you spouted to the Wizengamot. I've known that boy all his life, and I no longer hang out as much with the man who could have acted like his dad, because that man insisted on dragging a boy with no control over his parentage through the mud.” He turned to James. “Dumbledore's right. Someday you're going to recognise something that the rest of us have known for years, and I for one am going to enjoy rubbing it in with a little salt.” He hung his head. “I have known that boy for years. Three years ago, when James and Lily

divorced because James couldn't handle that Lily actually loves her own son, Harry tried to leave the wizarding world, because he knew how they felt about each other, and with him out of the way, there would be nothing to keep his mother and her husband apart from each other. He knew that he was the contention point, since that had been stated in the divorce decree.” He scowled at the audience. “Does that sound like the actions of a future dark lord? Someone who wants to leave so that his mother can be happy?”

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Harry's tears were just starting to dry when Albus Dumbledore arrived. He wiped them away quickly and stood. “I'm sorry, sir. I was just talking with my mother. I'll be gone from your school shortly.”

“Why? Because you have an ability I wish that I had?” Harry started at that, but stopped moving suddenly as he felt the cobra react.

“My fault. I'm sorry for the sudden movement.” He felt the snake relax, and relax himself. “What do you mean, sir?”

“For years I have watched animals of all sorts and wished that I could speak to them. Now I have a student who has the ability to converse with snakes in my school. From your reaction and speech, may I assume that the cobra is still with you?”

Harry answered by lifting his chin. “He's curious about you,” he said to the snake. “I think he wants to admire you.” The snake answered by slithering out carefully.

Would he care to see me in all my glory?

“Sir? The cobra is asking if you would like to see it in all its glory. I think that involves opening the hood.”

“As long as it does not denote an attack, I would love to.” Harry relayed this, and the snake's hood splayed open. “Ah, what a beautiful creature. I only wish that I could touch it without it assuming that I wished to attack.”

“The man wishes to admire you by touch. He finds you beautiful.”

He may touch.

Harry reported this, and the Headmaster gently brushed his fingers along the creature's head before slowly removing his hand from the snake's vicinity. "Astonishing. Such gentleness and beauty, and such power." He stopped and looked to Harry. "Do you see the parallel? You have used an ability that others consider evil to permit me to stroke a cobra in attack position and live to tell the tale. You were able to tell the snake my true intentions, rather than what it likely would have had to assume. There is no evil in your talent, Harry. The only evil comes from how it is used."

They heard a thump come from an alcove, and turned to see a seventh year student nearby. "Ah, Miss Tonks! May I assume your reasoning for being here is similar to mine?"

She smiled and nodded. "I get the freak label too, Evans."

"Call me Harry, especially with Mum standing right here."

The student blanched and started to apologise, but Lily simply laughed. "Don't worry about it. Right now, we're all just people trying to convince an honourable young man not to make a mistake, even if it is for all the right reasons that he came to the decision." Harry couldn't miss the pride in her voice as she spoke.

The girl called Tonks blinked once in confusion before nodding as understanding came. "Okay. Harry. As I was saying, I get called a freak as well." Before he could ask why, she had cycled her hair through several impossible colours, including mauve. She then took on the appearance of his mother for a moment, and then Molly Weasley. "I'm a metamorphmagus," she said. "Now, am I evil because I can look like anyone I want to?"

"No! If you used it to hurt people, then you probably could be considered evil, but ..." Far faster than a normal eleven year old, the message that she was telling him struck him. "It's how you use it," he said softly. "If I hurt people, that's bad. If I help them ..."

"I do believe that your son would have done brilliantly in Ravenclaw, Lily," Dumbledore said conversationally.

"May I tell my Housemates you said that, sir?" the girl asked with a grin. "Maybe we can make him an honorary Ravenclaw."

"Feel free, dear Nymphadora," he replied.

"Please sir," she said with a wince. "I hate that name."

"Why?" Harry asked honestly. "I think that it's a pretty name. Fairly unique, too, and both describe you well."

"Fast mover, ain't ya?" she replied wiggling her eyebrows. At his puzzled look, she burst out laughing. "Morgana, he's like this naturally! Professor, you just might want to give the girls some lessons in sex ed with your Harry around." At Lily's raised eyebrows, she said, "If he were a fifth or sixth year, I might consider it, but no firsties, okay? No worries there."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

Nymphadora laughed. "I know how much I hated this at your age, but I really do mean it when I say that you'll understand it when you're older."

He looked at her for a long minute before nodding. "I think you mean it. I'm just not old enough to get it yet, am I?"

Her face took on some interesting contortions as she fought down humour for some reason. "That's it exactly, Harry. And I give *you*, and *only* you, the permission to use my first name."

He looked up at the Headmaster. "I take it that I should drag my trunk back to the dormitories, sir?"

"Had the house elves not already performed that action for you, I would say yes," came the amused reply. Harry spun to find that his trunk was, in fact, missing. Dumbledore began to lead the group back to the hall. "Now, I think you might wish to return to the hall, where I expect that a number of people will be wishing to apologise to you."

Harry stopped. "Is it wrong of me to not want to listen to it right now? All the people that should have trusted me, didn't. My own girlfriend

hid from me!" He paused in his rant. "On a tin ... tan ... um, unrelated subject – how long will the snake last?"

"We don't know. Would you like to keep it and find out?" the Headmaster asked. "Oh, and I believe that the word you were looking for is 'tangent'."

Harry nodded in agreement. "I don't really have the slightest idea on how to care for a cobra, to be honest. Is there someone around who does? Maybe they can raise it and give me visitation rights?"

Lily laughed, but with a tinge of sadness, knowing where he'd learned that last phrase. "I'm sure we can."

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Things were tense around Gryffindor Tower for some time after that. Hermione was the only one in his year that he would speak with on more than school related things, since word came out that she simply had not known, and had assumed that everyone had a good reason to shy away from him.

Ron tried several times to patch things up with him, and finally gave up, asking the twins to tell Harry that. It turned out that the twins hadn't been to the duel, since they'd figured that it was the perfect time to check out that forbidden wing. They had come back actually scared, and swore on their family name that there was a large three-headed dog guarding a trap door.

Things continued along this line, even to Halloween. Ron was becoming a nightmare to Hermione, whether consciously or not. It came to a head after the Halloween, when he exploded at her after Charms for something regarding the spell they'd just been working on. She ran off, crying. Harry scowled, but saw the utterly lost look in his eyes.

The day progressed with no further sign of her in any of their classes. On the way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry overheard Parvati Patil telling her friend Lavender that Hermione was crying in the girls' bathroom and wanted to be left alone. Ron obviously overheard it as well, because he looked still more dejected

at the pronouncement, but a moment later they had entered the Great Hall, where the Halloween decorations put Hermione out of their minds, at least for a time.

A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins stutter. The feast appeared suddenly on the golden plates, as it had at the start-of-term banquet.

Harry couldn't really concentrate on dinner, though. He was more worried about Hermione. He was just about to turn to say something to Ron when Professor Quirrell burst into the room, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped against the table, and gasped, "Troll - in the dungeons - thought you ought to know." He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

It took some time order to be restored, and it involved the Headmaster firing purple firecrackers from his wand "Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Percy was in his element. "Follow me! Stick together, first years! No need to fear the troll if you follow my orders! Stay close behind me, now. Make way, first years coming through! Excuse me, I'm a prefect!"

"How could a troll get in?" Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

"Don't ask me, they're supposed to be really stupid," said Ron. "Maybe Peeves let it in for a Halloween joke."

They passed different groups of people hurrying in different directions. As they jostled their way through a crowd of confused Hufflepuffs, Harry suddenly grabbed Ron's arm. "Hermione."

"What about her?" Ron asked, confused at the one word comment.

"She doesn't know about the troll."

Ron bit his lip. "Oh bugger," Ron whispered. "But Percy'd better not see us."

Ducking down, they joined the Hufflepuffs going the other way, slipped down a deserted side corridor, and hurried off toward the girls' bathroom. They had just turned the corner when they heard quick footsteps behind them.

"Percy!" hissed Ron, pulling Harry behind a large stone griffin.

Peering around it, however, they saw not Percy but Snape. He crossed the corridor and disappeared from view.

"What's he doing?" Harry whispered. "Why isn't he down in the dungeons with the rest of the teachers?"

"Search me."

Quietly as possible, they crept along the next corridor after Snape's fading footsteps.

"He's heading for the third floor," Harry said, but Ron held up his hand.

"Can you smell something?"

Harry sniffed and a foul stench reached his nostrils, a mixture of old socks and the kind of public toilet no one seems to clean.

And then they heard it -- a low grunting, and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet. Ron pointed -- at the end of a passage to the left, something huge was moving toward them. They shrank into the shadows and watched as it emerged into a patch of moonlight.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, granite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. The smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

The troll stopped next to a doorway and peered inside. It wagged its long ears, making up what mind it possessed, then slouched slowly into the room.

"The key's in the lock," Harry muttered. "We could lock it in."

"Good idea," said Ron nervously.

They edged toward the open door, mouths dry, praying the troll wasn't about to come out of it. With one great leap, Harry managed to grab the key, slam the door, and lock it.

"Yes!"

Flushed with their victory, they started to run back up the passage, but as they reached the corner they heard something that made their hearts stop - a high, petrified scream - and it was coming from the chamber they'd just chained up. "Oh, no," said Ron, pale as the Bloody Baron.

"It's the girls' bathroom!" Harry gasped.

"Hermione!" they said together.

It was the last thing they wanted to do, but what choice did they have? Wheeling around, they sprinted back to the door and turned the key, fumbling in their panic. Harry pulled the door open and they ran inside. Hermione was shrinking against the wall, looking as if she was about to faint. The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the walls as it went.

"Confuse it!" Harry said desperately to Ron, and, seizing a tap, he threw it as hard as he could against the wall.

The troll stopped a few feet from Hermione. It lumbered around, blinking stupidly, to see what had made the noise. It saw Harry, hesitated, then made for him instead, lifting its club as it went.

"Oi, pea-brain!" yelled Ron from the other side of the chamber, and he threw a metal pipe at it. The troll didn't even seem to notice the pipe hitting its shoulder, but it heard the yell and paused again, turning its ugly snout toward Ron instead, giving Harry time to run around it.

"Come on, run, run!" Harry yelled at Hermione, trying to pull her toward the door, but she couldn't move, she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror. The shouting and the echoes seemed to be driving the troll berserk. It roared again and started toward Ron, who was nearest and had no way to escape.

Harry then did something that proved that he belonged in Gryffindor: He took a great running jump and managed to fasten his arms around the troll's neck from behind. The troll couldn't feel Harry hanging there, but even a troll will notice if you stick a long bit of wood up its nose, and Harry's wand had still been in his hand when he'd jumped -- it had gone straight up one of the troll's nostrils. Howling with pain, the troll twisted and flailed its club, with Harry clinging on for dear life.

He didn't know why, but he shouted "*Stupefy!*" at the same time that Ron shouted something suspiciously like "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" - that day's Charm.

He leapt from the troll's back as the thing staggered for a moment, just barely being missed by the falling club. He ran to Hermione. "Are you all right?" he asked in alarm. She answered him by throwing her arms around him and shuddering. He turned to Ron. "You okay, chum? No bruises or cuts?"

"No, but my heart's going a mile a minute. You okay? She okay?" Harry nodded, and then patted Hermione on the back for a moment. She didn't seem to want to let go, and even seemed to settle in slightly as she calmed.

"Hermione? We need to get up. We need to get one of the professors." She suddenly realised what she was doing and sat up straighter, letting go of him. He felt oddly unhappy about that.

"She looked over and saw Ron with his wand still in his hand, and looked at the troll. "Is it dead?" she asked warily.

"Don't know," Ron said. "I hit it with the *Wingardium Leviosa* and stole it's club while Harry was firing a *Stupefy* up it's nose." Meanwhile, Harry pulled his wand from the troll's nose. There was a blackish substance that smelled of burnt ... something. "Blech. Not only is it covered in troll bogies, but they're burnt troll bogies." This was a bit

much for Hermione, and she ran for the remaining toilets and emptied her nearly empty stomach. "Sorry," Ron said weakly.

"Thanks for being there, Ron," Harry said, holding out his hand. "I'm sorry I've been such a git these past days."

"We hurt you, Harry – you had a right to write us off."

"Just like James did me. I won't be that way to the others I care for." As soon as Ron took his hand, he pulled him into a quick hug.

Hermione came from the stall looking a little green, but none the worse for wear. "I'm glad to see you two talking again," she said happily. She let Harry distract her attention when she realised that he want to clean his wand without her stomach rebelling again.

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made the three of them look up. They hadn't realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll's roars. A moment later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape, with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

Snape bent over the troll. Professor McGonagall was looking at Ron and Harry. Harry had never seen her look so angry. Her lips were white. Hopes of winning fifty points for Gryffindor faded quickly from Harry's mind.

"What on earth were you thinking of?" said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice. Harry looked at Ron, who was still standing with his wand in the air. "You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

Snape gave Harry a swift, piercing look. Harry looked at the floor. He wished Ron would put his wand down.

Then a small voice came out of the shadows.

"Please, Professor McGonagall -- they were looking for me."

"Miss Granger!"

"I went looking for the troll because I -- I thought I could deal with it on my own -- you know, because I've read all about them."

Ron dropped his wand. Hermione Granger, telling a downright lie to a teacher?

"If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. Harry stuck his wand up its nose and fired off a *Stupefy* while Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

"Well -- in that case..." said Professor McGonagall, staring at the three of them, "Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?"

Hermione hung her head. Harry was speechless. Hermione was the last person to do anything against the rules, and here she was, pretending she had, to get them out of trouble. It was as if Snape had started handing out sweets.

"Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this," said Professor McGonagall. "I'm very disappointed in you. If you're not hurt at all, you'd better get off to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses."

"May I please wait for them outside, ma'am? I think I'd feel a little safer with them with me."

Professor McGonagall turned to Harry and Ron.

"Given tonight's escapade, I can understand that completely. I still say you two young men were lucky, but not many first years could have taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win Gryffindor five points. Professor Dumbledore will be informed of this. You may go."

The three of them rushed back to their tower, where they were greeted with some surprise, since Harry was laughing with them both by the time they had reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

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The first Quidditch game of the season ended spectacularly, with Harry performing a manoeuvre that Hermione assured him was the only one ever recorded in Quidditch history. The Gryffindor team had been rather soundly spanking the Slytherins when Harry sighted the Snitch. Flying at top speed toward it, avoiding the oncoming Bludgers and even the occasional player, he reached out for the Snitch with his right hand. It avoided by jinking left and slowing down slightly. Harry hadn't slowed yet, and he suddenly found himself running the risk of swallowing the Snitch. It hurt somewhat, but he managed to catch it in his teeth. Both hands on the broom, he flew to the ground before the referee, James Potter. It led to raised eyebrows, but the game was declared over with Gryffindor winning. He flew to the Gryffindor stands to show Hermione and Ron, and they both laughed.

They visited Hagrid the next day, once again pretending to eat his rock cakes as they talked. Given the giant's tendency to talk, they managed more information from him. They suspected Snape trying to get at whatever was on the third floor, but Hagrid informed them that Fluffy wasn't really a danger and that any injuries that Snape might have taken were purely coincidental. Besides, Snape knew what Dumbledore was hiding for Nicholas Flamel. They were then treated to a few minutes of variations on "I should not 'ave said that..."

One morning in mid-December, Hogwarts woke to find itself covered in several feet of snow. The lake froze solid and the Weasley twins were punished for bewitching several snowballs so that they followed Quirrell around, bouncing off the back of his turban. The few owls that managed to battle their way through the stormy sky to deliver mail had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid before they could fly off again.

No one could wait for the holidays to start. While the Gryffindor common room and the Great Hall had roaring fires, the drafty corridors had become icy and a bitter wind rattled the windows in the classrooms.

"I do feel so sorry," said Draco Malfoy one day in the hallway, just before Transfiguration Class, "for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home."

"Oh, your parents finally kicked you out, did they?" Harry quipped before sliding past him into the room.

Malfoy turned an odd shade of purple, which was a standard shade for him around Harry. None of the insults that he had tried against Harry had worked. He had tried insisting that Harry would be replaced as Seeker with a tree frog, but given that most of the school was ignoring him because of the obvious Seeker prowess Harry had displayed. He'd tried to move on to this tack for a while, and Harry was certain that he would move back to insulting him as a bastard fairly soon.

They researched heavily in the library to see if they could discover the secret of Nicholas Flamel, but there was no information available in any of the books that they had checked. Soon, it was time for Hermione to leave for the holidays, and she bid Harry a fond farewell. "See what you can find out!" she said as she said goodbye at the station. Ron was heading back with her, while Harry was going to Sirius's house in Hogsmeade.

This is going to be interesting, he mused. The three Marauders have been twitchy around me since the duel. They've apologised so many times it's started to become funny. Mum says that it's guilty feelings. He walked to the home. I wonder when they'll realise that I've not had a single Potions class since the first one? How are we going to work that one out? I've stayed up on the reading, if only because Hermione has let me know where we are, but brewing is something else entirely.

Chapter 6

Christmas dawned crisp, cold, and with a light and fluffy snow falling outside. He was awakened by his younger brother jumping on his bed yelling, "Wake up! It's CHRISTMAS!" He laughed along with James, and chuckled to see his sister at the door, trying to look annoyed at being awakened so early, but her excitement was also evident – she looked about ready to vibrate downstairs.

So Harry got slowly from his bed and moved very slowly to do what needed to be done, just to drive her crazy. "Harry, you prat, it's Christmas! Why are you moving so slowly?" she asked, a whine creeping into her voice that Harry was fairly certain she was unaware of.

He grinned. "I was waiting for you to drop the apathetic look and admit that you're as excited as I am that it's Christmas." He bounced from his bed and joined them as they bounded downstairs, proving that a throng can number as few as three people.

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"The danger time approaches," the deep voice said.

"But not yet," intoned another.

"We should prepare, however. The time may not yet be here, but I for one do not wish to be caught with my pants down, as the saying goes."

"Then prepare we shall. When the time comes, those who need to know, will know."

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Harry chuckled to look at the faces of the adults at the table. "You forgot, didn't you?"

Lily blushed. "I'm sorry, Harry. You're my son, and I'm not taking good enough care of you."

He snorted in response. "So I haven't been taking Potions with Snape. I was going to fail it anyway, because he hates me. I've been studying the text, keeping up with the class because of Hermione and Ron. It's just not easy to keep up with the rest, since I can't really make the actual Potions. What I need to do is get used to converting the formulas into actions." He stopped and blinked for several seconds. "Okay – I have been hanging around Hermione way too much – that was pure Hermione speaking there." He shook his head. Between classes, working on Potions, and trying to figure out who Nicholas Flamel is ... " He paused as he watched everyone share a significant look.

"Okay. You know something, don't you?"

"The teachers all know," Lily said. "And I know these three. Given enough information, they'd solve it too. And you're not going to give up on it, are you?"

"You know me better than that, Mum. Can you see me giving up on any of the previous things this year?"

"No." She frowned. "Where have you looked so far?"

"Let's see – we've looked in Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century, Notable Magical Names of Our Time, Important Modern Magical Discoveries, and A Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry. We've done scatter-shot runs through the rest of the library, but we don't even know where to begin looking."

"First things first," Peter said. "I was just behind your mother in Potions. Then again, except for Sniv ... Professor Snape," he amended, seeing Lily's glare, "except for him, everyone else was behind Lily. We get the materials, and I'll tutor you in Potions. Does that work for you?"

Harry nodded after looking over at his mother, who nodded. Sirius chimed in. "As for the other thing – how about a Chocolate Frog?" The single raised eyebrow that Harry aimed at Sirius spoke volumes for what Harry thought of the man's sanity. "I'm serious!" was the reply.

"We know you are," Remus said with a smirk. "It's your first name."

"No, you git," came the laughing reply. "I mean that he should look through his collection."

"There's a Flamel card?" Harry asked incredulously. "I thought that ... well, with Ron and his collection, I'd figure that I'd have heard of it by now."

"Just look over your cards is all I'm saying," Sirius said. "Now, unless finding out who he is happens to be incredibly and earth-shatteringly important, I was thinking of challenging you three kids to a snowball fight."

Harry thought about it for a moment before he ran for his coat and gloves. "I'll check my cards later!" he yelled as he exited the house, followed closely by his brother and sister.

A fun time was had by all, with Sirius losing spectacularly due to treachery on his side of the war. Lily turned on him as he began to win against her children, and distracted him long enough for the children to successfully pelt him with enough snowballs that he was forced to run. When he found out about Lily's treachery, he chased her around the yard until he finally tackled her into the soft snow. He was utterly bewildered by the odd look in her eyes as she lay in the snow beneath him, but only until she reached up and pulled his head down, kissing him thoroughly.

This led to the children being shooed into the house so that the two could talk.

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By the time the return to Hogwarts came around, Lily and Sirius were dancing around each other. Sirius still hoped for an eventual reconciliation between Lily and James, while Lily had apparently decided that such an event was unlikely and refused to live for what might be.

Peter was given rooms on the grounds in which to tutor Harry. He was given a school budget to buy what supplies he might need, and

he took to it with a vengeance. By the time Harry was actually back for the next term, he had successfully created several of the potions that the others had made for their class.

He greeted Ron and Hermione warmly as they returned, and explained what had been happening in his life over the Christmas break. "How was Charlie?"

"Oh, good, good," Ron said quietly, remembering the visit to Rumania. "You need to send a letter to Ginny. She's still broken up over that parselmouth bit of stupidity we all subjected you to." He scowled. "We've known you almost your whole life, and we agree with James Potter about you just because we hear something we don't like?"

"Stop beating yourself up over it, Ron. I'll drop Ginny a line to let her know that she's still my girlfriend if she wants to be."

"Did you find out anything more about Nicholas Flamel, though?" Hermione asked. Harry was forced to answer in the negative, having forgotten what Sirius had told him on Christmas Day. They had almost given up hope of ever finding Flamel in a library book, even though Harry was still sure he'd read the name somewhere. Once term had started, they were back to skimming through books for ten minutes during their breaks. Harry had even less time than the other two, because Quidditch practice had started again.

Wood was working the team harder than ever. Even the endless rain that had replaced the snow couldn't dampen his spirits. The Weasleys complained that Wood was becoming a fanatic, but Harry was on Wood's side. If they won their next match, against Hufflepuff, they would overtake Slytherin in the house championship for the first time in seven years. Then, during one particularly wet and muddy practice session, Wood gave the team a bit of bad news. He'd just gotten very angry with the Weasleys, who kept dive-bombing each other and pretending to fall off their brooms.

"Will you stop messing around!" he yelled. "That's exactly the sort of thing that'll lose us the match! Snape's refereeing this time, and he'll be looking for any excuse to knock points off Gryffindor!"

George Weasley really did fall off his broom at these words. "Snape's refereeing?" he spluttered through a mouthful of mud. "When's he ever refereed a Quidditch match? He's not going to be fair if we might overtake Slytherin."

The rest of the team landed next to George to complain, too. "It's not my fault," said Wood. "We've just got to make sure we play a clean game, so Snape hasn't got an excuse to pick on us."

Which was all very well, thought Harry, but he had another reason for not wanting Snape near him while he was playing Quidditch, after the pain at the feast and everything else he'd seen. He wondered if it were Snape that had been sparking the cobra at the duel. (Kali (as Padma had named it, since she knew about them and had taken to raising the cobra) was still around and doing quite well, and was quite pleased to discover that Harry was actually able to teach others how to speak the language of snakes, having started with Padma. It was currently a topic of discussion in the faculty as to what exactly being a parselmouth entailed.)

The rest of the team hung back to talk to one another as usual at the end of practice, but Harry headed straight back to the Gryffindor common room, where he found Ron and Hermione playing chess. Chess was the only thing Hermione ever lost at, something Harry and Ron thought was very good for her.

"Don't talk to me for a moment," said Ron when Harry sat down next to him, "I need to concen - " He caught sight of Harry's face. "What's the matter with you? You look terrible."

Speaking quietly so that no one else would hear, Harry told the other two about Snape's sudden, sinister desire to be a Quidditch referee.

"Don't play," said Hermione at once.

"Say you're ill," said Ron.

"Pretend to break your leg," Hermione suggested.

"Really break your leg," said Ron.

"I can't," said Harry. "There isn't a reserve Seeker. If I back out, Gryffindor can't play at all."

At that moment Neville toppled into the common room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone's guess, because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the Leg-Locker Curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor tower.

Everyone fell over laughing except Hermione, who leapt up and performed the counter-curse. Neville's legs sprang apart and he got to his feet, trembling.

"What happened?" Hermione asked him, leading him over to sit with Harry and Ron.

"Malfoy," said Neville shakily. "I met him outside the library. He said he'd been looking for someone to practice that on."

"Go to Professor McGonagall!" Hermione urged Neville. "Report him!"

Neville shook his head. "I don't want more trouble," he mumbled.

"You've got to stand up to him, Neville!" said Ron. "He's used to walking all over people, but that's no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier."

"There's no need to tell me I'm not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy's already done that," Neville choked out.

Harry felt in the pocket of his robes and pulled out a Chocolate Frog, the very last one from the box Hermione had given him for Christmas. He gave it to Neville, who looked as though he might cry. "You're worth twelve of Malfoy," Harry said. "The Sorting Hat chose you for Gryffindor, didn't it? And where's Malfoy? In stinking Slytherin."

Neville's lips twitched in a weak smile as he unwrapped the frog. "Thanks, Harry ... I think I'll go to bed ... D'you want the card, you collect them, don't you?" As Neville walked away, Harry looked at the Famous Wizard card.

"Dumbledore again," he said, "I can't believe how long it took me to actually finally get of of his cards. I've been collecting since I was -" He gasped, staring at the back of the card. Then he looked up at Ron and Hermione.

"I've found him!" he whispered. "I've found Flamel! I told you I'd read the name somewhere before, I read it on the train coming here - listen to this: 'Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel!'"

Hermione jumped to her feet. She hadn't looked so excited since they'd gotten back the marks for their very first piece of homework. "Stay there!" she said, and she sprinted up the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Harry and Ron barely had time to exchange mystified looks before she was dashing back, an enormous old book in her arms.

"I never thought to look in here!" she whispered excitedly. "I got this out of the library weeks ago for a bit of light reading."

"Light reading?" asked Ron incredulously, but Hermione told him to be quiet until she'd looked something up, and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself.

At last she found what she was looking for. "I knew it! I knew it!"

"Are we allowed to speak yet?" said Ron grumpily. Hermione ignored him.

"Nicolas Flamel," she whispered dramatically, "is the only known maker of the Philosopher's Stone!"

This didn't have quite the effect she'd expected.

"The what?" said Harry and Ron.

"Oh, honestly, don't you two read? Look - read that, there."

She pushed the book toward them, and Harry and Ron read:

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

"See?" said Hermione, when Harry and Ron had finished. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Philosopher's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it, that's why he wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A stone that makes gold and stops you from ever dying!" said Harry. "No wonder Snape's after it! Anyone would want it."

"And no wonder we couldn't find Flamel in that Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry," said Ron. "He's not exactly recent if he's six hundred and sixty-five, is he?"

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Harry took to sneaking around the halls after curfew, using some of the tricks that the twins had taught him. To a very great extent, it was a chance for him to unwind after the day's events were over, simply because his days were so terribly full, what with Quidditch and Uncle Peter's Potions tutoring, which somehow had begun to develop other classmates, Neville being the first. Also, he was marking out places to best pull pranks from next year. Fred and George were good for the kick-in-the-pants type, as long as you wanted explosions with it, but Harry felt that some subtlety was needed in the school.

One night he found himself getting too close to Filch and Snape as they did their rounds, and slipped into a large empty classroom. He looked around at the surprisingly clean room, and found something unusual in there – a large mirror.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

His panic fading now that there was no sound of Filch and Snape, Harry moved nearer to the mirror, wanting to look at himself but see no reflection again. He stepped in front of it.

He had to clap his hands to his mouth to stop himself from screaming. He whirled around. His heart was pounding far more furiously than when the book had screamed - for he had seen not only himself in the mirror, but James Potter as well.

But the room was empty. Breathing very fast, he turned slowly back to the mirror.

There he was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind him, was James Potter. He reached out a hand and felt the air behind him. If Potter was really there, Harry would touch him, their reflections were so close together, but he felt only air – he existed only in the mirror.

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection.

"Dad?" he whispered.

James just looked at him, smiling. Harry stared hungrily back at him, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach this version of James. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.

How long he stood there, he didn't know. The reflections did not fade and he looked and looked until a distant noise brought him back to his senses. He couldn't stay here, he had to find his way back to bed. He tore his eyes away from his father's face, whispered, "I'll come back," and hurried from the room.

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He told Ron and Hermione about the mirror, and the curious image that it showed. They both insisted on seeing it for themselves, so he carefully led them through the passages in the walls that led to the area closest to the room.

Finally in the room, he showed them the mirror. Standing where he originally had, he once again saw a proud James Potter, his arm around a now beaming Harry. "I don't see anything," Ron complained.

"Look in it properly, go on, stand where I am."

Harry stepped aside, but with Ron in front of the mirror, he couldn't see his family anymore, just Ron in his paisley pajamas.

Ron, though, was staring transfixed at his image. "Look at me!" he said.

"Can you see all your family standing around you?"

"No - I'm alone - but I'm different - I look older - and I'm head boy!"

"What?"

"I am - I'm wearing the badge like Bill used to - and I'm holding the house cup and the Quidditch cup - I'm Quidditch captain, too."

Ron tore his eyes away from this splendid sight to look excitedly at Harry.

"Do you think this mirror shows the future?"

"Dunno. Hermione? Want a turn yourself?" Harry carefully nudged Ron from in front of the mirror, where he was preening at the images that he saw.

Hermione stepped in front of the mirror and her hand went immediately to her mouth as she let out a little squeak of surprise. "My goodness!" she said. Her hands moved as if she were holding something precious in her arms as she said, "I'm a full adult, and I'm married - I can see my husband behind me." She tilted her head slightly and a faraway smile entered her eyes. "I'm nursing our first

child, and she has such beautiful red hair." She shook her head as if to clear it and stepped back, staring at the mirror, narrowing her eyes.

Her face suddenly fell. "No, it doesn't show the future, Harry. Look at the inscription on it. Then read it backwards." She paused for a moment for the two of them to look at it carefully. "'I show not your face but your heart's desire'. This mirror simply shows us what we really want." She looked near to tears.

"Miss Granger is far wiser than many ten times her age," said a voice from against the wall.

Harry felt as though his insides had turned to ice. He looked behind him. Sitting on one of the desks by the wall was none other than Albus Dumbledore. Harry must have walked straight past him, so desperate to get to the mirror he hadn't noticed him.

"I – I didn't see you, sir."

"I make it a habit not to be seen," came the reply, and Harry was relieved to see a smile on the old man's face. "So," said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to walk over to Harry and the others, "you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"I didn't know it was called that, sir."

"It makes sense, since the first thing most people read is 'Erised', which is desire spelled backwards," Hermione said awkwardly.

Harry thought. Then he said slowly, "It shows us what we want ... whatever we want ... "

"Yes and no," said Dumbledore quietly. "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known the love of the man that everyone can see is your father, see him admiring and caring for you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them." He turned to Ron and said, "Something that is not unbelievable, Ronald. You have such potential within you, though perhaps not the way that you would assume." He

turned back to Hermione. "Miss Granger has always been alone, and desires family and love and those who accept her for who she is." Hermione blushed.

"However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible."

He sighed. "The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that."

"Yes sir. It's fairly easy, really. As much as I would like it if James Potter accepted me, that's just not going to happen in this lifetime. There's no sense staring at a mirror that will only lie to me."

As they left the room, Harry turned back to Dumbledore. "Sir – Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask you something?"

"Obviously, you've just done so," Dumbledore smiled. "You may ask me one more thing, however."

"What do you see when you look in the mirror? If it's not too personal a question, that is."

"Me? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks."

Harry stared.

"One can never have enough socks," said Dumbledore. "Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn't get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books."

It was only when he was back in bed that it struck Harry that Dumbledore might not have been quite truthful.

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The day of the Quidditch game approached, with suggestions as to what he might do, since it was obvious in the minds of the Gryffindors that Snape absolutely detested Harry. When he could do so without being overheard, he still referred to Harry as "Potter", usually in the most disgusted tone he could manage.

The reason that Snape was taking over the refereeing duties for that game was apparently due to a family obligation for James Potter, one that simply could not be rescheduled. The Slytherins in the school, led by Malfoy, began to embellish on the likely outcomes of the game, usually which involved life-changing injuries for Harry. The most intriguing involved an accident that ended up turning Harry into a were-koala. It was fairly obvious who had said that one, because the rest of the Slytherins tended to give him a wide berth from that point on.

They continued to speculate on the Stone and what they might do with it had they one, which managed to keep most of Harry's thoughts of the impending game. But they came crashing back down on him the actual game day, if only because of Ron and Hermione. Harry knew, when they wished him good luck outside the locker rooms, that Ron and Hermione were wondering whether they'd ever see him alive again. This wasn't what you'd call comforting. Harry hardly heard a word of Wood's pep talk as he pulled on his Quidditch robes and picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Ron and Hermione, meanwhile, had found a place in the stands next to Neville, who couldn't understand why they looked so grim and worried, or why they had both brought their wands to the match. Little did Harry know that Ron and Hermione had been secretly practicing the Leg-Locker Curse. They'd gotten the idea from Malfoy using it on Neville, and were ready to use it on Snape if he showed any sign of wanting to hurt Harry.

"Now, don't forget, it's *Locomotor Mortis*," Hermione muttered as Ron slipped his wand up his sleeve.

"I know," Ron snapped. "Don't nag."

Back in the locker room, Wood had taken Harry aside.

"Don't want to pressure you, Evans, but if we ever need an early capture of the Snitch it's now. Finish the game before Snape can favour Hufflepuff too much."

"The whole school's out there!" said Fred Weasley, peering out of the door. "Even - blimey - Dumbledore's come to watch!"

Harry's heart did a somersault.

"Dumbledore?" he said, dashing to the door to make sure. Fred was right. There was no mistaking that silver beard.

Harry could have laughed out loud with relief. He was safe. There was simply no way that Snape would dare to try to hurt him if Dumbledore was watching.

Perhaps that was why Snape was looking so angry as the teams marched onto the field, something that Ron noticed, too.

"I've never seen Snape look so mean," he told Hermione. "Look - they're off. Ouch!"

Someone had poked Ron in the back of the head. It was Malfoy.

"Oh, sorry, Weasley, didn't see you there."

Malfoy grinned broadly at Crabbe and Goyle.

"Wonder how long Potter's going to stay on his broom this time? Anyone want a bet? What about you, Weasley?"

Ron didn't answer; Snape had just awarded Hufflepuff a penalty because George Weasley had hit a Bludger at him. Hermione, who had all her fingers crossed in her lap, was squinting fixedly at Harry, who was circling the game like a hawk, looking for the Snitch.

"You know how I think they choose people for the Gryffindor team?" said Malfoy loudly a few minutes later, as Snape awarded Hufflepuff another penalty for no reason at all. "It's people they feel sorry for. See, there's Potter, who's got no parents, then there's the Weasleys,

who've got no money - you should be on the team, Longbottom, you've got no brains."

Neville went bright red but turned in his seat to face Malfoy.

"I'm worth twelve of you, Malfoy," he stammered.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle howled with laughter, but Ron, still not daring to take his eyes from the game, said, "You tell him, Neville."

"Longbottom, if brains were gold you'd be poorer than Weasley, and that's saying something."

Ron's nerves were already stretched to the breaking point with anxiety about Harry.

"I'm warning you, Malfoy - one more word ... "

"Ron!" said Hermione suddenly, "Harry - "

"What? Where?"

Harry had suddenly gone into a spectacular dive, which drew gasps and cheers from the crowd. Hermione stood up, her crossed fingers in her mouth, as Harry streaked toward the ground like a bullet.

"You're in luck, Weasley, Potter's obviously spotted some money on the ground!" said Malfoy.

Ron snapped. Before Malfoy knew what was happening, Ron was on top of him, wrestling him to the ground. Neville hesitated, then clambered over the back of his seat to help.

"Come on, Harry!" Hermione screamed, leaping onto her seat to watch as Harry sped straight at Snape - she didn't even notice Malfoy and Ron rolling around under her seat, or the scuffles and yelps coming from the whirl of fists that was Neville, Crabbe, and Goyle.

Up in the air, Snape turned on his broomstick just in time to see something scarlet shoot past him, missing him by inches - the next second, Harry had pulled out of the dive, his arm raised in triumph,

the Snitch clasped in his hand. The Hufflepuff Seeker, Cedric Diggory, was staring in unabashed surprise as the catch.

The stands erupted; it had to be a record, no one could ever remember the Snitch being caught so quickly.

"Ron! Ron! Where are you? The game's over! Harry's won! We've won! Gryffindor is in the lead!" shrieked Hermione, dancing up and down on her seat and hugging Parvati Patil in the row in front.

Harry jumped off his broom, a foot from the ground. He couldn't believe it. He'd done it - the game was over; it had barely lasted five minutes. As Gryffindors came spilling onto the field, he saw Snape land nearby, white-faced and tight-lipped - then Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into Dumbledore's smiling face.

"Well done," said Dumbledore quietly, so that only Harry could hear. "Nice to see you haven't been brooding about that mirror ... been keeping busy ... excellent ... "

Snape spat bitterly on the ground.

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Harry left the locker room alone some time later, to take his Nimbus Two Thousand back to the broom shed. He couldn't ever remember feeling happier. He'd really done something to be proud of now - no one could say he was just a famous name any more. The evening air had never smelled so sweet. He walked over the damp grass, reliving the last hour in his head, which was a happy blur: Gryffindors running to lift him onto their shoulders; Ron and Hermione in the distance, jumping up and down, Ron cheering through a heavy nosebleed.

Harry had reached the shed. He leaned against the wooden door and looked up at Hogwarts, with its windows glowing red in the setting sun. Gryffindor in the lead. He'd done it, he'd shown Snape ...

And speaking of Snape ...

A hooded figure came swiftly down the front steps of the castle. Clearly not wanting to be seen, it walked as fast as possible toward

the forbidden forest. Harry's victory faded from his mind as he watched. He recognized the figure's prowling walk. Snape, sneaking into the forest while everyone else was at dinner - what was going on?

Harry jumped back on his Nimbus Two Thousand and took off. Gliding silently over the castle he saw Snape enter the forest at a run. He followed.

The trees were so thick he couldn't see where Snape had gone. He flew in circles, lower and lower, brushing the top branches of trees until he heard voices. He glided toward them and landed noiselessly in a towering beech tree.

He climbed carefully along one of the branches, holding tight to his broomstick, trying to see through the leaves.

Below, in a shadowy clearing, stood Snape, but he wasn't alone. Quirrell was there, too. Harry couldn't make out the look on his face, but he was stuttering worse than ever. Harry strained to catch what they were saying.

"... d-don't know why you wanted t-t-to meet here of all p-places, Severus ..."

"Oh, I thought we'd keep this private," said Snape, his voice icy. "Students aren't supposed to know about the Philosopher's Stone, after all."

Harry leaned forward. Quirrell was mumbling something. Snape interrupted him.

"Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

"B-b-but Severus, I -"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," said Snape, taking a step toward him.

"I-I don't know what you -"

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

An owl hooted loudly, and Harry nearly fell out of the tree. He steadied himself in time to hear Snape say, " - your little bit of hocus-pocus. I'm waiting."

"B-but I d-d-don't - "

"Very well," Snape cut in. "We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie."

He threw his cloak over his head and strode out of the clearing. It was almost dark now, but Harry could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

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"Harry, where have you been?" Hermione squeaked.

"We won! You won! We won!" shouted Ron, thumping Harry on the back. "And I gave Malfoy a black eye, and Neville tried to take on Crabbe and Goyle single-handed! He's still out cold but Madam Pomfrey says he'll be all right - talk about showing Slytherin! Everyone's waiting for you in the common room, we're having a party, Fred and George stole some cakes and stuff from the kitchens."

"Never mind that now," said Harry breathlessly. "Let's find an empty room, you wait 'til you hear this ... "

He made sure Peeves wasn't inside before shutting the door behind them, then he told them what he'd seen and heard.

"So we were right, it is the Sorcerer's Stone, and Snape's trying to force Quirrell to help him get it. He asked if he knew how to get past Fluffy - and he said something about Quirrell's 'hocus pocus' - I reckon there are other things guarding the stone apart from Fluffy, loads of enchantments, probably, and Quirrell would have done some anti-Dark Arts spell that Snape needs to break through - "

"So you mean the Stone's only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?" said Hermione in alarm.

"It'll be gone by next Tuesday," said Ron.

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Quirrell, however, must have been braver than they'd thought. In the weeks that followed he did seem to be getting paler and thinner, but it didn't look as though he'd cracked yet.

Every time they passed the third-floor corridor, Harry, Ron, and Hermione would press their ears to the door to check that Fluffy was still growling inside. Snape was sweeping about in his usual bad temper, which surely meant that the Stone was still safe. Whenever Harry passed Quirrell these days he gave him an encouraging sort of smile, and Ron had started telling people off for laughing at Quirrell's stutter.

Hermione, however, had more on her mind than the Stone. She had started drawing up study schedules and colour coding all her notes. Harry and Ron wouldn't have minded, but she kept nagging them to do the same.

"Hermione, the exams are ages away."

"Ten weeks," Hermione snapped. "That's not ages, that's like a second to Nicolas Flamel."

"But we're not six hundred years old," Ron reminded her. "Anyway, what are you studying for, you already know it all."

"What am I studying for? Are you crazy? You realize we need to pass these exams to get into the second year? They're very important, I should have started studying a month ago, I don't know what's gotten into me ... "

Unfortunately, the teachers seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Hermione. They piled so much homework on them that the Easter holidays weren't nearly as much fun as the Christmas ones. It was hard to relax with Hermione next to you reciting the twelve uses

of dragon's blood or practising wand movements. Moaning and yawning, Harry and Ron spent most of their free time in the library with her, trying to get through all their extra work.

"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throwing down his quill and looking longingly out of the library window. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months. The sky was a clear, forget-me-not blue, and there was a feeling in the air of summer coming.

Harry, who was looking up "Dittany" in One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi, didn't look up until he heard Ron say, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

Hagrid shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat.

"Jus' lookin'," he said, in a shifty voice that got their interest at once. "An' what're you lot up ter?" He looked suddenly suspicious. "Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?"

"Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," said Ron impressively. "And we know what that dog's guarding, it's a Philosopher's St -"

"Shhhh!" Hagrid looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening. "Don' go shoutin' about it, what's the matter with yeh?"

"There are a few things we wanted to ask you, as a matter of fact," said Harry, "about what's guarding the Stone apart from Fluffy -"

"SHHHH!" said Hagrid again. "Listen - come an' see me later, I'm not promisin' I'll tell yeh anythin', mind, but don' go rabbitin' about it in here, students aren' s'posed ter know. They'll think I've told yeh -"

"See you later, then," said Harry.

Hagrid shuffled off.

"What was he hiding behind his back?" said Hermione thoughtfully.

"Do you think it had anything to do with the Stone?"

"I'm going to see what section he was in," said Ron, who'd had enough of working. He came back a minute later with a pile of books in his arms and slammed them down on the table.

"Dragons!" he whispered. "Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper's Guide."

"Hagrid's always wanted a dragon, he told me so the first time I ever met him," said Harry.

"But it's against our laws," said Ron. "Dragon breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that. It's hard to stop Muggles from noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden - anyway, you can't tame dragons, it's dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie's got off wild ones in Romania."

"But there aren't wild dragons in Britain?" said Harry.

"Of course there are," said Ron. "Common Welsh Green and Hebridean Blacks. The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you. Our kind have to keep putting spells on Muggles who've spotted them, to make them forget."

"So what on earth is Hagrid up to?" said Hermione.

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When they knocked on the door of the gamekeeper's hut an hour later, they were surprised to see that all the curtains were closed. Hagrid called "Who is it?" before he let them in, and then shut the door quickly behind them.

It was stifling hot inside. Even though it was such a warm day, there was a blazing fire in the grate. Hagrid made them tea and offered them stoat sandwiches, which they refused. "So - yeh wanted to ask me somethin'?"

"Yes," said Harry. There was no point beating around the bush. "We were wondering if you could tell us what's guarding the Sorcerer's Stone apart from Fluffy."

Hagrid frowned at him. "O' course I can't," he said. "Number one, I don' know meself. Number two, yeh know too much already, so I wouldn' tell yeh if I could. That Stone's here fer a good reason. It was almost stolen outta Gringotts - I s'ppose yeh've worked that out an' all? Beats me how yeh even know abou' Fluffy."

"Oh, come on, Hagrid, you might not want to tell us, but you do know, you know everything that goes on round here," said Hermione in a warm, flattering voice. Hagrid's beard twitched and they could tell he was smiling. "We only wondered who had done the guarding, really." Hermione went on. "We wondered who Dumbledore had trusted enough to help him, apart from you."

Hagrid's chest swelled at these last words. Harry and Ron beamed at Hermione. "Well, I don' s'pose it could hurt ter tell yeh that ... let's see ... he borrowed Fluffy from me ... then some o' the teachers did enchantments ... Professor Sprout - Professor Flitwick - Professor McGonagall - " he ticked them off on his fingers, "Professor Quirrell - an' Dumbledore himself did somethin', o' course. Hang on, I've forgotten someone. Oh yeah, Professor Snape."

"Snape?"

"Yeah - yer not still on abou' that, are yeh? Look, Snape helped protect the Stone, he's not about ter steal it."

Harry knew Ron and Hermione were thinking the same as he was. If Snape had been in on protecting the Stone, it must have been easy to find out how the other teachers had guarded it. He probably knew everything - except, it seemed, Quirrell's spell and how to get past Fluffy.

"You're the only one who knows how to get past Fluffy, aren't you, Hagrid?" said Harry anxiously. "And you wouldn't tell anyone, would you? Not even one of the teachers?"

"Not a soul knows except me an' Dumbledore," said Hagrid proudly.

"Well, that's something," Harry muttered to the others. "Hagrid, can we have a window open? I'm boiling."

"Can't, Harry, sorry," said Hagrid. Harry noticed him glance at the fire. Harry looked at it, too.

"Hagrid - what's that?"

But he already knew what it was. In the very heart of the fire, underneath the kettle, was a huge, black egg.

"Ah," said Hagrid, fiddling nervously with his beard, "That's er ... "

"Where did you get it, Hagrid?" said Ron, crouching over the fire to get a closer look at the egg. "It must've cost you a fortune."

"Won it," said Hagrid. "Las' night. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it's hatched?" said Hermione.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin'," said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library - Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit - it's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on I em, see, an' when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here - how ter recognize diff'rent eggs - what I got there's a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them."

He looked very pleased with himself, but Hermione didn't. "Hagrid, you live in a wooden house," she said.

But Hagrid wasn't listening. He was humming merrily as he stoked the fire.

So now they had something else to worry about: what might happen to Hagrid if anyone found out he was hiding an illegal dragon in his hut.

"Wonder what it's like to have a peaceful life," Ron sighed, as evening after evening they struggled through all the extra homework

they were getting. Hermione had now started making study schedules for Harry and Ron, too. It was driving them nuts.

Then, one breakfast time, Hedwig brought Harry another note from Hagrid. He had written only two words: *It's hatching*.

Ron wanted to skip Herbology and go straight down to the hut. Hermione wouldn't hear of it.

"Hermione, how many times in our lives are we going to see a dragon hatching?"

"We've got lessons, we'll get into trouble, and that's nothing to what Hagrid's going to be in when someone finds out what he's doing - "

"Shut up!" Harry whispered.

Malfoy was only a few feet away and he had stopped dead to listen. How much had he heard? Harry didn't like the look on Malfoy's face at all.

Ron and Hermione argued all the way to Herbology and in the end, Hermione agreed to run down to Hagrid's with the other two during morning break. When the bell sounded from the castle at the end of their lesson, the three of them dropped their trowels at once and hurried through the grounds to the edge of the forest. Hagrid greeted them, looking flushed and excited. "It's nearly out." He ushered them inside.

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside; a funny clicking noise was coming from it. They all drew their chairs up to the table and watched with bated breath.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes. It sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs. "Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!" said Hagrid.

"Hagrid," said Hermione, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid was about to answer when the color suddenly drained from his face - he leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

"What's the matter?"

"Someone was lookin' through the gap in the curtains - it's a kid - he's runnin' back up ter the school."

Harry bolted to the door and looked out. Even at a distance there was no mistaking him.

Malfoy had seen the dragon.

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The smile lurking on Malfoy's face during the next week made Harry, Ron, and Hermione very nervous. They spent most of their free time in Hagrid's darkened hut, trying to reason with him.

"Just let him go," Harry urged. "Set him free."

"I can't," said Hagrid. "He's too little. He'd die."

They looked at the dragon. It had grown three times in length in just a week. Smoke kept furling out of its nostrils. Hagrid hadn't been doing his game-keeping duties because the dragon was keeping him so busy. There were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor.

"I've decided to call him Norbert," said Hagrid, looking at the dragon with misty eyes. "He really knows me now, watch. Norbert! Norbert! Where's Mommy?"

"He's lost his marbles," Ron muttered in Harry's ear.

"Hagrid," said Harry loudly, "give it two weeks and Norbert's going to be as long as your house. Malfoy could go to Dumbledore at any moment."

Hagrid bit his lip. "I - I know I can't keep him forever, but I can't just dump him, I can't."

Harry suddenly turned to Ron. "Charlie," he said.

"You're losing it, too," said Ron. "I'm Ron, remember?"

"No - Charlie - your brother, Charlie. In Romania. Studying dragons. We could send Norbert to him. Charlie can take care of him and then put him back in the wild!"

"Brilliant!" said Ron. "How about it, Hagrid?"

And in the end, Hagrid agreed that they could send an owl to Charlie to ask him.

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The following week dragged by. Wednesday night found Hermione and Harry sitting alone in the common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed. The clock on the wall had just chimed midnight when there was a tap on the dark window.

"It's Hedwig!" said Harry, hurrying to let her in. "She'll have Charlie's answer!" The three of them put their heads together to read the note.

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter - I'd be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won't be easy getting him here. I think the best thing will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they mustn't be seen carrying an illegal dragon.

Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it's still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,

Charlie

They looked at one another. "We've got the invisibility cloak," said Harry. "It shouldn't be too difficult - I think the cloaks big enough to cover two of us and Norbert."

It was a mark of how bad the last week had been that the other two agreed with him. Anything to get rid of Norbert - and Malfoy.

The remaining days went slowly, and Ron came back into the common room as white as one of the school's ghosts on Friday. "My bag ripped open, and all my books went flying. Malfoy was there and grabbed one of them. It was the book with Charlie's letter! He's going to know we're getting rid of Norbert."

"It's too late to change the plan now," Harry told Hermione. "We haven't got time to send Charlie another owl, and this could be our only chance to get rid of Norbert. We'll have to risk it. And we have got the invisibility cloak, Malfoy doesn't know about that."

They found Fang, the boarhound, sitting outside with a bandaged tail when they went to tell Hagrid, who opened a window to talk to them.

"I won't let you in," he puffed. "Norbert's at a tricky stage - nothin' I can't handle."

When they told him about Charlie's letter, his eyes filled with tears, although that might have been because Norbert had just bitten him on the leg.

"Aargh! It's all right, he only got my boot - jus' playin' - he's only a baby, after all."

The baby banged its tail on the wall, making the windows rattle. Harry and Hermione walked back to the castle feeling Saturday couldn't come quickly enough.

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They would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say good-bye to Norbert if they hadn't been so worried about what they had to do. It was a very dark, cloudy night, and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid's hut because they'd had to wait for Peeves to get out of their way in the entrance hall, where he'd been playing tennis against the wall.

Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate. "He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid in a muffled voice. "Bye-bye, Norbert!" Hagrid sobbed, as Harry and Hermione covered the crate with the invisibility cloak that he'd managed to filch from James Potter and stepped underneath it themselves. "Mommy will never forget you!"

How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle, they never knew. Midnight ticked nearer as they heaved Norbert up the marble staircase in the entrance hall and along the dark corridors. UP another staircase, then another - even one of Harry's shortcuts didn't make the work much easier.

"Nearly there!" Harry panted as they reached the corridor beneath the tallest tower.

Then a sudden movement ahead of them made them almost drop the crate. They shrank into the shadows, staring at the dark outlines of two people grappling with each other ten feet away. A lamp flared.

Professor McGonagall, in a tartan bathrobe and a hair net, had Malfoy by the ear. "Detention!" she shouted. "And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how dare you - "

"You don't understand, Professor. Harry Potter's coming - he's got a dragon!"

"What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come on - I shall see Professor Snape about you, Malfoy!"

The steep spiral staircase up to the top of the tower seemed the easiest thing in the world after that. They'd stepped out into the cold night air, glad to be able to breathe properly again, since all they had left to do was hand off Norbert to Charlie's friends. Hermione did a sort of jig.

"Malfoy's got detention! I could sing!"

"Don't," Harry advised her.

Chuckling about Malfoy, they waited, Norbert thrashing about in his crate. About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swooping down out of the darkness.

Charlie's friends were a cheery lot. They showed Harry and Hermione the harness they'd rigged up, so they could suspend Norbert between them. They all helped buckle Norbert safely into it and then Harry and Hermione shook hands with the others and thanked them very much.

At last, Norbert was going ... going ... gone.

They slipped back down the spiral staircase, their hearts as light as their hands, now that Norbert was off them. No more dragon - Malfoy in detention - what could spoil their happiness?

The answer to that was waiting at the foot of the stairs. As they stepped into the corridor, Filch's face loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

"Well, well, well," he whispered, "we are in trouble."

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Things couldn't have been worse.

Filch took them down to Professor McGonagall's study on the first floor, where they sat and waited without saying a word to each other. Hermione was trembling. Excuses, alibis, and wild cover-up stories chased each other around Harry's brain, each more feeble than the last. He couldn't see how they were going to get out of trouble this time. They were cornered. There was no reason on earth that

Professor McGonagall would accept for their being out of bed and creeping around the school in the dead of night, let alone being up the tallest astronomy tower, which was out-of-bounds except for classes. Add Norbert and they might as well be packing their bags already.

Had Harry thought that things couldn't have been worse? He was wrong. When Professor McGonagall appeared, she was leading Neville.

"Harry!" Neville burst Out, the moment he saw the other two. "I was trying to find you to warn you, I heard Malfoy saying he was going to catch you, he said you had a drag - "

Harry shook his head violently to shut Neville up, but Professor McGonagall had seen. She looked more likely to breathe fire than Norbert as she towered over the three of them.

"I would never have believed it of any of you. Mr. Filch says you were up in the astronomy tower. It's one o'clock in the morning. Explain yourselves."

It was the first time Hermione had ever failed to answer a teacher's question. She was staring at her slippers, as still as a statue.

"I think I've got a good idea of what's been going on," said Professor McGonagall. "It doesn't take a genius to work it out. You fed Draco Malfoy some cock-and-bull story about a dragon, trying to get him out of bed and into trouble. I've already caught him. I suppose you think it's funny that Longbottom here heard the story and believed it, too?"

Harry caught Neville's eye and tried to tell him without words that this wasn't true, because Neville was looking stunned and hurt. Poor, blundering Neville - Harry knew what it must have cost him to try and find them in the dark, to warn them.

"I'm disgusted," said Professor McGonagall. "Four students out of bed in one night! I've never heard of such a thing before! You, Miss Granger, I thought you had more sense. As for you, Mr. Potter, I thought Gryffindor meant more to you than this. All three of you will receive detentions - yes, you too, Mr. Longbottom, nothing gives you

the right to walk around school at night, especially these days, it's very dangerous - and fifty points will be taken from Gryffindor."

"Fifty?" Harry gasped - they would lose the lead, the lead he'd won in the last Quidditch match.

"Fifty points each," said Professor McGonagall, breathing heavily through her long, pointed nose.

"Professor - please - "

"You can't - "

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Potter. Now get back to bed, all of you. I've never been more ashamed of Gryffindor students."

Harry inhaled deeply at her use of the wrong last name, but a quick look from McGonagall told him that she would likely take another two hundred points just from him if he continued to speak. *I won't forget this, Professor*, he thought angrily, his fear of expulsion long gone now.

A hundred and fifty points lost. That put Gryffindor in last place. In one night, they'd ruined any chance Gryffindor had had for the house cup. Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach. How could they ever make up for this?

Harry didn't sleep all night. He could hear Neville sobbing into his pillow for what seemed like hours. Harry couldn't think of anything to say to comfort him. He knew Neville, like himself, was dreading the dawn. What would happen when the rest of Gryffindor found out what they'd done?

At first, Gryffindors passing the giant hourglasses that recorded the house points the next day thought there'd been a mistake. How could they suddenly have a hundred and fifty points fewer than yesterday? And then the story started to spread: Harry Evans, the famous Harry Evans, their hero of two Quidditch matches, had lost them all those points, him and a couple of other stupid first years.

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At least the Gryffindors had learned their lesson this time around. The three first years were mere shunned by the rest of the House, rather than taken aside and beaten, as they had been last time. Even his mother looked at him as if she were ashamed of his actions.

Everywhere Harry went, people pointed and didn't trouble to lower their voices as they insulted him. Slytherins, on the other hand, clapped as he walked past them, whistling and cheering, "Thanks Potter, we owe you one!", stressing the 'Potter'.

Only Ron stood by him. "They'll all forget this in a few weeks. Fred and George have lost loads of points in all the time they've been here, and people still like them."

"They've never lost a hundred and fifty points in one go, though, have they?" said Harry miserably.

"Well - no," Ron admitted.

It was a bit late to repair the damage, but Harry swore to himself not to meddle in things that weren't his business from now on. He'd had it with sneaking around and spying. He felt so ashamed of himself that he went to Wood and offered to resign from the Quidditch team.

"Resign?" Wood thundered. "What good'll that do? How are we going to get any points back if we can't win at Quidditch?"

But even Quidditch had lost its fun. The rest of the team wouldn't speak to Harry during practice, and if they had to speak about him, they called him "the Seeker." Finally after one practice, he'd had enough. In mid practice, he simply flew to the ground and began to walk into the castle, broom over his shoulder.

Wood almost crashed as he landed in front of Harry. "Where do you think you're going?" he yelled in Harry's face.

"Into the school," Harry replied quietly.

"You're in the middle of a Quidditch practice! Get back up there!"

"The Seeker' prefers not to. I'm learning that even in my position, it's hard to stay up on what's happening if no one talks to you. The occasional Bludger that 'accidentally' makes it my way isn't all that appreciated either. So, since you've made it rather obvious that you'd rather someone else be playing the Seeker position, I decided to make it easier on you." He started walking again. "Have fun with try-outs!"

He walked to Professor McGonagall's office and knocked on the door. She opened it, and her face took on a look of minor annoyance – she still hadn't forgiven him for losing Gryffindor one hundred and fifty hundred points. "May I help you?" she asked with some asperity.

"No. I thought you'd want the Nimbus back, since the next Seeker is going to need it. I've just quit the team." Before she could say anything, he bulled forward. "I've already been screamed at by Wood about leaving. I don't care."

"So you're just going to quit when the going gets tough?" she asked, her Scottish brogue becoming thicker. Harry had learned that this was a danger sign, because it meant that she was getting angry.

"Let's see, I can stick it out and be treated as a leper for the rest of the year and be pelted with Bludgers as I'm shunned, or I can just be shunned. I choose the version that causes less bodily injury. Besides, this gives the twins their chance to hate me – they missed out when Harry 'Potter' spoke parseltongue." He spat out the surname 'Potter'.

"Don't you take that tone with me, young man," she barked at him. "Just because you're angry that some people call you by the last name Potter does not give you the right ... "

"You do it yourself!" he interrupted at the top of his lungs. "The night you pulled fifty points from the four of us, *you* called me 'Potter'! And you told Neville that it was better to sit back and do nothing than to lose Gryffindor fifty points by chewing him out! Wonderful Gryffindor characteristic you're instilling there – don't make waves! He was doing the right thing! Whether or not the story was true, he was trying to do the right thing, and you punished him for it!" He paused for just a moment. "And of course the story has gotten around that it was all

my fault, so Hermione isn't anywhere nearly as badly treated. I've even got my own House-mates calling me Potter!"

McGonagall looked at him, stunned. She had never had a student – much less a first year – attempt to give her a bawling out.

He sighed – a sound of resignation. "I'm fighting it, but I'm seeing now that it's simply going to happen. I might as well embrace it."

"What's that, Mr. Evans?" she asked carefully.

"I'm a Death Eater bastard. I can't escape that and I never will. None of the Houses serve their students – they just train us for open warfare. I refuse to be a Slytherin, because Malfoy is an example of that House, as is the Head of House. Gryffindor is proving to be Slytherins with a shinier coat. Sorry, that came from Sirius. I think Remus would call it 'having a better press agent'."

She snorted. "Yes, that does sound like Mr. Lupin."

He opened his mouth to speak further, but the door exploded open, and Wood stood at the door. "Professor! It's Evans, he –"

Harry turned around to see the entire team standing outside. "The word you're looking for, Wood, is 'quit'. I am no longer on the team."

"But Harry –" said the twins.

"Oh, now I'm 'Harry' again, and not 'the Seeker'? Not 'Potter'? Now that you see the Quidditch Cup slipping away, *now* you're willing to talk to me?" He stood and stalked over to them. "You had no problems with my being a parselmouth, but you shun me for losing points from Gryffindor? Get lost."

"I could order you onto the team," McGonagall said.

"True, and I'd play. I'd sit up there and watch. Let Chang catch the Snitch. You can force me to be on the team, but I can't think of any way you can force me to actually play properly. I've no reason to. My team-mates won't even speak *to* me because of this stupid point system, the flying coach is just waiting for the day I take Voldemort's

place as he's so certain that I will, and I've got everyone and his dog calling me by the last name 'Potter'! I'm sick of it!" The dam broke, and he was suddenly an eleven year old boy again. "I'm sick of it." He fell to his knees on the floor and began to cry as it all overwhelmed him.

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He wasn't sure how long he cried for, but when he was aware again, Lily was in the room with them, and the Quidditch team was gone. "Hi, Mum," he said dejectedly. "Sorry for being such a failure."

"You're not a failure," she said softly. "You made a mistake, and things just got too much for you."

"Thing is, mum? Malfoy wasn't lying. Neither was Neville. We just didn't want Hagrid to get fired or sent to Azkaban for harbouring a dragon. We shouldn't have been so loud in returning, but ... he's a friend, Mum. The points are worth it, and I guess I can handle the cold shoulder, considering I get it so much from the Potter family, but ... " He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Professor McGonagall. I will accept whatever punishment you declare. Talking back to a Professor is wrong. I've already lost us the House Cup – what's a few more points and an extra detention?"

McGonagall sat up straighter and looked at Harry sharply. "Very well, Mr. Evans. For your behaviour in this office today, I hereby give you twenty-five points for your honesty, and fifty points shall be returned as well for having them improperly removed from Mr. Longbottom." She stopped and softened. "While I do not encourage having a student yelling at a professor, there are times when it is necessary." She looked pointedly at him. "I would suggest you learn exactly when those times are, however – I do not want this to be a regular occurrence."

He was blinking at her. "I ... I don't understand."

"You made valid points, Harry," McGonagall said softly. "You needed to break through my anger at you, and you did it by shocking me. Since there is no proof any more that our grounds keeper ever had a dragon, of course nothing will be done to him. You were willing to

face my wrath to let me know that I had treated Mr. Longbottom unfairly, and as I said, you were honest with me. *You* still must have the detention for being out after curfew, but your House-mates will note a change in the glass.” She paused. “Steer clear of Professor Snape for a while longer,” she advised. “He is not happy with Malfoy, and by extension, you.”

“I live,” Harry grumbled. “That’s enough for him to hate me.” McGonagall remained silent, but her eyes showed her agreement.

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He returned to the tower to find the team sitting around on the couches, looking dejected. “So, reconciling yourselves to losing?” he asked sharply.

Fred stepped forward. “No, we’re realising how childish we were.”

“We were angry, and forgetting what we’ve done before. Besides, we’ve talked ... ” George added.

“ ... to Ron and Hermione, and we understand a bit more now.” Fred finished.

“Just us, not the team,” George hastily added.

Angelina Johnson stepped forward. Harry wasn’t sure why, but the pretty thirteen year old black girl made his pulse race just a bit when he was around her. “Harry, I’m sorry. We never thought about the stress that we were adding to you. It’s bad enough when the rest of the House is shunning you, but when your team-mates do too? If we promise to talk things out from now on, will you come back to the team?”

“Have to talk to McGonagall to get the broom back, but I think so. You guys promise to talk to me, rather than what you’ve been doing?” They nodded.

Just then, the portrait opened and Neville Longbottom stepped through, his steps bright and cheerful. He had a Nimbus 2000 over

his shoulder. "Harry! Professor McGonagall had the best news for me!"

"I know," Harry said with an answering smile. "I explained something to her, and she realised that I was right. I have a detention because of it, but at least you got your fifty points back for doing the right thing."

"She told me that and I ran to check the hourglasses. Any idea where the extra twenty-five points came from?" He suddenly remembered what was over his shoulder. "Oh, she said that you forgot your broom. I was to tell you that it was a gift for you, not a school broom. She said that you'd understand."

Harry nodded with a smile but then put on a puzzled face. "Extra twenty-five points? I know about yours, but nothing more." He looked at the rest of the team, who were looking at him as if they simply didn't believe him. "What? I have no idea what McGonagall was thinking when she gave points back. If we have an extra twenty-five, then look around. Maybe a bunch of Gryffindors did really well in various classes."

The looks that Fred and George alone were giving him told him that he wasn't believed.

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The following morning, notes were delivered to Harry and Hermione at the breakfast table. They were the same:

Your detention will take place at eleven o'clock tonight.

Meet Mr. Filch in the entrance hall.

Professor McGonagall

At eleven o'clock that night, they said good-bye to Ron in the common room and went down to the entrance hall with Hermione. Filch was already there - and so was Malfoy. Harry had also forgotten that Malfoy had gotten a detention, too. "Follow me," said Filch, lighting a lamp and leading them outside.

"I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?" he said, leering at them. "Oh yes ... hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me ... It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out ... hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed ... Right, off we go, and don't think of running off, now, it'll be worse for you if you do."

They marched off across the dark grounds. Harry wondered what their punishment was going to be. It must be something really horrible, or Filch wouldn't be sounding so delighted.

The moon was bright, but clouds scudding across it kept throwing them into darkness. Ahead, Harry could see the lighted windows of Hagrid's hut. Then they heard a distant shout. "Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started."

Harry's heart rose; if they were going to be working with Hagrid it wouldn't be so bad. His relief must have showed in his face, because Filch said, "I suppose you think you'll be enjoying yourself with that oaf? Well, think again, boy - it's into the forest you're going and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece."

At this, Hermione let out a little moan, and Malfoy stopped dead in his tracks.

"The forest?" he repeated, and he didn't sound quite as cool as usual. "We can't go in there at night - there's all sorts of things in there - werewolves, I heard."

Hermione clutched the sleeve of Harry's robe and made a choking noise.

"That's your problem, isn't it?" said Filch, his voice cracking with glee. "Should've thought of them werewolves before you got in trouble, shouldn't you?"

Hagrid came striding toward them out of the dark, Fang at his heel. He was carrying his large crossbow, and a quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder.

"Abou' time," he said. "I bin waitin' fer half an hour already. All right, Harry, Hermione?"

"I shouldn't be too friendly to them, Hagrid," said Filch coldly, "they're here to be punished, after all."

"That's why yer late, is it?" said Hagrid, frowning at Filch. "Bin lecturin' them, eh? Not your place ter do that. Yeh've done yer bit, I'll take over from here."

"I'll be back at dawn," said Filch, "for what's left of them," he added nastily, and he turned and started back toward the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

Malfoy now turned to Hagrid.

"I'm not going in that forest," he said, and Harry was pleased to hear the note of panic in his voice.

"Yeh are if yeh want ter stay at Hogwarts," said Hagrid fiercely. "Yeh've done wrong an' now yeh've got ter pay fer it."

"But this is servant stuff, it's not for students to do. I thought we'd be copying lines or something, if my father knew I was doing this, he'd - "

" - tell yer that's how it is at Hogwarts," Hagrid growled. "Copyin' lines! What good's that ter anyone? Yeh'll do summat useful or yeh'll get out. If yeh think yer father'd rather you were expelled, then get back off ter the castle an' pack. Go on!"

Malfoy didn't move. He looked at Hagrid furiously, but then dropped his gaze.

"Right then," said Hagrid, "now, listen carefully, 'cause it's dangerous what we're gonna do tonight, an' I don' want no one takin' risks. Follow me over here a moment."

He led them to the very edge of the forest. Holding his lamp up high, he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze lifted their hair as they looked into the forest.

"Look there," said Hagrid, "see that stuff shinin' on the ground? Silvery stuff? That's unicorn blood. There's a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We're gonna try an' find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery."

"And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?" said Malfoy, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

"There's nothin' that lives in the forest that'll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang," said Hagrid. "An' keep ter the path. Right, now, we're gonna split inter two parties an' follow the trail in diff'rent directions. There's blood all over the place, it must've bin staggerin' around since last night at least."

"I want Fang," said Malfoy quickly, looking at Fang's long teeth.

"All right, but I warn yeh, he's a coward," said Hagrid. " So me an' Harry'll go one way an' Draco, Hermione, an' Fang'll go the other. Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we'll send up green sparks, right? Get yer wands out an' practice now - that's it - an' if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks, an' we'll all come an' find yeh - so, be careful - let's go."

The forest was black and silent. A little way into it they reached a fork in the earth path, and Harry and Hagrid took the left path while Malfoy, Hermione, and Fang took the right.

They walked in silence, their eyes on the ground. Every now and then a ray of moonlight through the branches above lit a spot of silver-blue blood on the fallen leaves.

Harry saw that Hagrid looked very worried.

"Could a werewolf be killing the unicorns?" Harry asked.

"Not fast enough," said Hagrid. "It's not easy ter catch a unicorn, they're powerful magic creatures. I never knew one ter be hurt before."

They walked past a mossy tree stump. Harry could hear running water; there must be a stream somewhere close by. There were still spots of unicorn blood here and there along the winding path.

"You all right, Hermione?" Hagrid whispered. "Don' worry, it can't've gone far if it's this badly hurt, an' then we'll be able ter - GET BEHIND THAT TREE!"

Hagrid seized Harry and hoisted him off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out an arrow and fitted it into his crossbow, raising it, ready to fire. The three of them listened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby: it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground. Hagrid was squinting up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

"I knew it, " he murmured. "There's summat in here that shouldn' be."

"A werewolf?" Harry suggested.

"That wasn' no werewolf an' it wasn' no unicorn, neither," said Hagrid grimly. "Right, follow me, but careful, now."

They walked more slowly, ears straining for the faintest sound. Suddenly, in a clearing ahead, something definitely moved.

"Who's there?" Hagrid called. "Show yerself - I'm armed!"

And into the clearing came - was it a man, or a horse? To the waist, a man, with red hair and beard, but below that was a horse's gleaming chestnut body with a long, reddish tail. Harry and Hermione's jaws dropped.

"Oh, it's you, Ronan," said Hagrid in relief. "How are yeh?"

He walked forward and shook the centaur's hand.

"Good evening to you, Hagrid," said Ronan. He had a deep, sorrowful voice. "Were you going to shoot me?"

"Can't be too careful, Ronan," said Hagrid, patting his crossbow. "There's summat bad loose in this forest. This is Harry Potter, by the way. Student up at the school. An' this is Ronan. He's a centaur."

"I'd noticed," said Hermione faintly.

"Good evening," said Ronan. "Student, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?"

"Erm - "

"A bit," said Harry somewhat timidly.

"A bit. Well, that's something." Ronan sighed. He flung back his head and stared at the sky. "Mars is bright tonight."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, glancing up, too. "Listen, I'm glad we've run inter yeh, Ronan, 'cause there's a unicorn bin hurt - you seen anythin'?"

Ronan did not respond at first, but then remarked, "The innocent are always the first ones hurt. So it has always been."

The conversation didn't improve, especially when another centaur by the name of Bane appeared, also remarking that Mars was unusually bright. They could get no useful words from them.

Hagrid started to speak when Harry noticed something. "Hagrid! Look! Red sparks, the others are in trouble!"

"You wait here!" Hagrid shouted. "Stay on the path, I'll come back for yeh!"

He heard him crashing away through the undergrowth until there no sound but the rustling of leaves around him. The minutes dragged by. His ears seemed sharper than usual - picking up every sigh of the wind, every cracking twig. What was going on? Where were the others?

He looked around and noticed that the blood seemed thicker in one direction. He followed it for a short distance until he found splashes on the roots of a tree, as though the poor creature had been

thrashing around in pain close by. Harry could see a clearing ahead, through the tangled branches of an ancient oak.

Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. They inched closer.

It was the unicorn all right, and it was dead. Harry had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. Its long, slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly-white on the dark leaves.

Harry had taken one step toward it when a slithering sound made him freeze where he stood. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered ... Then, out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Harry stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound in the animal's side, and began to drink its blood.

The hooded figure raised its head suddenly and looked right at Harry - unicorn blood was dribbling down its front. It got to its feet and came swiftly toward Harry - he couldn't move for fear.

Then a pain like he'd never felt before pierced his head; it was as though his scar were on fire. Half blinded, he staggered backward. He heard hooves behind him, galloping, and something jumped clean over Harry, charging at the figure.

The pain in Harry's head was so bad he fell to his knees. It took a minute or two to pass. When he looked up, the figure had gone. A centaur was standing over him, not Ronan or Bane; this one looked younger; he had white-blond hair and a palomino body.

"Are you all right?" said the centaur, pulling Harry to his feet.

"Yes - thank you - what was that?"

The centaur didn't answer. He had astonishingly blue eyes, like pale sapphires. He looked carefully at Harry, his eyes lingering on the scar that stood out, livid, on Harry's forehead.

"You are the Potter boy," he said. "You had better get back to Hagrid. The forest is not safe at this time - especially for you. Can you ride? It will be quicker this way.

"My name is Firenze," he added, as he lowered himself on to his front legs so that Harry could clamber onto his back.

There was suddenly a sound of more galloping from the other side of the clearing. Ronan and Bane came bursting through the trees, their flanks heaving and sweaty.

"Firenze!" Bane thundered. "What are you doing? You have a human on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?"

"Do you realize who this is?" said Firenze. "This is the Potter boy. The quicker he leaves this forest, the better."

"Evans," Harry mumbled.

"What have you been telling him?" growled Bane, ignoring Harry. "Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?"

Ronan pawed the ground nervously. "I'm sure Firenze thought he was acting for the best, " he said in his gloomy voice.

Bane kicked his back legs in anger.

"For the best! What is that to do with us? Centaurs are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our forest!"

Firenze suddenly reared on to his hind legs in anger, so that Harry had to grab his shoulders to stay on.

"Do you not see that unicorn?" Firenze bellowed at Bane. "Do you not understand why it was killed? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I set myself against what is lurking in this forest, Bane, yes, with humans alongside me if I must."

And Firenze whisked around; with Harry clutching on as best he could, they plunged off into the trees, leaving Ronan and Bane behind them.

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on.

"Why's Bane so angry?" he asked. "What was that thing you saved me from, anyway?"

Firenze slowed to a walk, warned Harry to keep his head bowed in case of low-hanging branches, but did not answer Harry's question. They made their way through the trees in silence for so long that Harry thought Firenze didn't want to talk to him anymore. They were passing through a particularly dense patch of trees, however, when Firenze suddenly stopped.

"Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used for?"

"No," said Harry, startled by the odd question. "We've only used the horn and tail hair in Potions. And please sir, it's Evans. Harry Evans."

"If you insist, Mr. Evans. The reason that you do not know is because it is a monstrous thing to slay a unicorn," said Firenze. "Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."

Harry stared at the back of Firenze's head, which was dappled silver in the moonlight.

"But who'd be that desperate?" he wondered aloud. "If you're going to be cursed forever, death's better, isn't it?"

"It is," Firenze agreed, "unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else - something that will bring you back to full strength and power - something that will mean you can never die. Mr. Evans, do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?"

"The Philosopher's Stone! Of course - the Elixir of Life! But I don't understand who - "

"Can you think of nobody who has waited many years to return to power, who has clung to life, awaiting their chance?"

It was as though an iron fist had clenched suddenly around Harry's heart. Over the rustling of the trees, he seemed to hear once more what Hagrid had told him on the night they had met: "Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die."

"Do you mean," Harry croaked, "that was Vol - "

"Harry! Harry, are you all right?"

Hermione was running toward them down the path, Hagrid, Malfoy and Fang puffing along behind her.

"I'm fine," said Harry, hardly knowing what he was saying. "The unicorn's dead, Hagrid, it's in that clearing back there."

"This is where I leave you," Firenze murmured as Hagrid hurried off to examine the unicorn. "You are safe now."

Harry slid off his back.

"Good luck, Harry Potter," said Firenze. "The planets have been read wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I hope this is one of those times."

He turned and cantered back into the depths of the forest, leaving Harry shivering behind him.

Hagrid was fuming. Malfoy, it seemed, had sneaked up behind Hermione and grabbed her as a joke. Hermione had panicked and sent up the sparks.

"Might've been here if this 'un hadn't bin tryin' ta scare Hermione." They trudged back to Hagrid's hut

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Ron had fallen asleep in the dark common room, waiting for them to return. He shouted something about Quidditch fouls when Harry roughly shook him awake. In a matter of seconds, though, he was wide-eyed as Harry began to tell him and Hermione what had happened in the forest.

Harry couldn't sit down. He paced up and down in front of the fire. He was still shaking.

"Snape wants the stone for Voldemort ... and Voldemort's waiting in the forest ... and all this time we thought Snape just wanted to get rich ... "

"Stop saying the name!" said Ron in a terrified whisper, as if he thought Voldemort could hear them.

Harry wasn't listening.

"Firenze saved me, but he shouldn't have done so ... Bane was furious ... he was talking about interfering with what the planets say is going to happen ... They must show that Voldemort's coming back ... Bane thinks Firenze should have let Voldemort kill me ... I suppose that's written in the stars as well."

"Will you stop saying the name!" Ron hissed.

"So all I've got to wait for now is Snape to steal the Stone," Harry went on feverishly, "then Voldemort will be able to come and finish me off ... Well, I suppose Bane'll be happy."

Hermione looked very frightened, but she had a word of comfort.

"Harry, everyone says Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was ever afraid of. With Dumbledore around, You-Know-Who won't touch you. Anyway, who says the centaurs are right? It sounds like fortune-telling to me, and Professor McGonagall says that's a very imprecise branch of magic."

The sky had turned light before they stopped talking. They went to bed exhausted, their throats sore.

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In years to come, Harry would never quite remember how he had managed to get through his exams when he half expected Voldemort to come bursting through the door at any moment. Yet the days crept by, and there could be no doubt that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door.

It was sweltering hot, especially in the large classroom where they did their written papers. They had been given special, new quills for the exams, which had been bewitched with an Anti-Cheating spell.

The practicals were also difficult for some – although Harry had no idea why his mother wanted him to make a pineapple tap-dance across a desk. (He earned extra points for having it actually do a proper soft-shoe that would have made Sammy Davis Junior proud.)

Harry did the best he could, trying to ignore the stabbing pains in his forehead, which had been bothering him ever since his trip into the forest. Neville thought Harry had a bad case of exam nerves because Harry couldn't sleep, but the truth was that Harry kept being woken by his old nightmare, except that it was now worse than ever because there was a hooded figure dripping blood in it.

Maybe it was because they hadn't seen what Harry had seen in the forest, or because they didn't have scars burning on their foreheads, but Ron and Hermione didn't seem as worried about the Stone as Harry. The idea of Voldemort certainly scared them, but he didn't keep visiting them in dreams, and they were so busy with their studying they didn't have much time to fret about what Snape or anyone else might be up to.

Their very last exam was History of Magic. One hour of answering questions about batty old wizards who'd invented self-stirring cauldrons and they'd be free, free for a whole wonderful week until their exam results came out. When the ghost of Professor Binns told them to put down their quills and roll up their parchment, Harry couldn't help cheering with the rest.

"That was far easier than I thought it would be," said Hermione as they joined the crowds flocking out onto the sunny grounds. "I needn't have learned about the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct or the uprising of Elfric the Eager."

Hermione always liked to go through their exam papers afterward, but Ron said this made him feel ill, so they wandered down to the lake and flopped under a tree. The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan were tickling the tentacles of a giant squid, which was basking in the warm shallows.

"No more studying," Ron sighed happily, stretching out on the grass. "You could look more cheerful, Harry, we've got a week before we find out how badly we've done, there's no need to worry yet."

Harry was rubbing his forehead.

"I wish I knew what this means!" he burst out angrily. "My scar keeps hurting - it's happened before, but never as often as this."

"Go to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione suggested.

"I'm not ill," said Harry. "I think it's a warning ... it means danger's coming ..."

Ron couldn't get worked up, it was too hot. "Harry, relax, Hermione's right, the Stone's safe as long as Dumbledore's around. Anyway, we've never had any proof Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off once, he's not going to try it again in a hurry. And Neville will play Quidditch for England before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down."

Harry nodded, but he couldn't shake off a lurking feeling that there was something he'd forgotten to do, something important. When he tried to explain this, Hermione said, "That's just the exams. I woke up last night and was halfway through my Transfiguration notes before I remembered we'd done that one."

Harry was quite sure the unsettled feeling didn't have anything to do with work, though. He watched an owl flutter toward the school across the bright blue sky, a note clamped in its mouth. Hagrid was

the only one who ever sent him letters. Hagrid would never betray Dumbledore. Hagrid would never tell anyone how to get past Fluffy ... never ... but -

Harry suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Where're you going?" said Ron sleepily.

"I've just thought of something," said Harry. He had turned white. "We've got to go and see Hagrid, now."

"Why?" panted Hermione, hurrying to keep up.

"Don't you think it's a bit odd," said Harry, scrambling up the grassy slope, "that what Hagrid wants more than anything else is a dragon, and a stranger turns up who just happens to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs if it's against wizard law? Lucky they found Hagrid, don't you think? Why didn't I see it before?"

"What are you talking about?" said Ron, but Harry, sprinting across the grounds toward the forest, didn't answer.

Hagrid was sitting in an armchair outside his house; his trousers and sleeves were rolled up, and he was shelling peas into a large bowl. "Hullo," he said, smiling. "Finished yer exams? Got time fer a drink?"

"Yes, please," said Ron, but Harry cut him off.

"No, we're in a hurry. Hagrid, I've got to ask you something. You know that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing cards with look like?"

"Dunno," said Hagrid casually, "he wouldn't take his cloak off."

He saw the three of them look stunned and raised his eyebrows.

"It's not that unusual, yeh get a lot o' funny folk in the Hog's Head - that's the pub down in the village. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn' he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up."

Harry sank down next to the bowl of peas.

"What did you talk to him about, Hagrid? Did you mention Hogwarts at all?"

"Mighta come up," said Hagrid, frowning as he tried to remember. "Yeah ... he asked what I did, an' I told him I was gamekeeper here ... He asked a bit about the sorta creatures I took after ... so I told him ... an' I said what I'd always really wanted was a dragon ... an' then ... I can' remember too well, 'cause he kept buyin' me drinks ... Let's see ... yeah, then he said he had the dragon egg an' we could play cards fer it if I wanted ... but he had ter be sure I could handle it, he didn' want it ter go ter any old home ... So I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy ... "

"And did he - did he seem interested in Fluffy?" Harry asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Well - yeah - how many three-headed dogs d'yeh meet, even around Hogwarts? So I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus' play him a bit o' music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep - "

Hagrid suddenly looked horrified.

"I shouldn'ta told yeh that!" he blurted out. "Forget I said it! Hey - where're yeh goin'?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione didn't speak to each other at all until they came to a halt in the entrance hall, which seemed very cold and gloomy after the grounds.

"We've got to go to Dumbledore," said Harry. "Hagrid told that stranger how to get past Fluffy, and it was either Snape or Voldemort under that cloak - it must've been easy, once he'd got Hagrid drunk. I just hope Dumbledore believes us. Firenze might back us up if Bane doesn't stop him. Where's Dumbledore's office?"

They looked around, as if hoping to see a sign pointing them in the right direction. They had never been told where Dumbledore lived, nor did they know anyone who had been sent to see him.

"We'll just have to - " Harry began, but a voice suddenly rang across the hall.

"What are you three doing inside?"

It was Professor McGonagall, carrying a large pile of books.

"We want to see Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione, rather bravely, Harry and Ron thought.

"See Professor Dumbledore?" Professor McGonagall repeated, as though this was a very fishy thing to want to do. "Why?"

Harry swallowed - now what?

"It's sort of secret," he said, but he wished at once he hadn't, because Professor McGonagall's nostrils flared.

"Professor Dumbledore left ten minutes ago," she said coldly. "He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off for London at once."

"He's gone?" said Harry frantically. "Now?"

"Professor Dumbledore is a very great wizard, Potter, he has many demands on his time - "

"But this is important."

"Something *you* have to say is more important than the Ministry of Magic, Evans?" she asked in a voice dripping sarcasm.

"Look," said Harry, throwing caution to the winds, "Professor - it's about the Philosopher's Stone - "

Whatever Professor McGonagall had expected, it wasn't that. The books she was carrying tumbled out of her arms, but she didn't pick them up.

"How do you know - ?" she spluttered.

"Professor, I think - I know - that Sn - that someone's going to try and steal the Stone. I've got to talk to Professor Dumbledore."

She eyed him with a mixture of shock and suspicion.

"Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow," she said finally. "I don't know how you found out about the Stone, but rest assured, no one can possibly steal it, it's too well protected."

"But Professor - "

"Potter, I know what I'm talking about," she said shortly. She bent down and gathered up the fallen books. "I suggest you all go back outside and enjoy the sunshine."

But they didn't.

"It's tonight," said Harry, once he was sure Professor McGonagall was out of earshot. "Snape's going through the trapdoor tonight. He's found out everything he needs, and now he's got Dumbledore out of the way. He sent that note, I bet the Ministry of Magic will get a real shock when Dumbledore turns up."

"But what can we - "

Hermione gasped. Harry and Ron wheeled round.

Snape was standing there.

"Good afternoon," he said smoothly.

They stared at him.

"You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said, with an odd, twisted smile.

"We were - " Harry began, without any idea what he was going to say.

"You want to be more careful," said Snape. "Hanging around like this, people will think you're up to something. And Gryffindor really can't afford to lose any more points, can it?"

Harry flushed. They turned to go outside, but Snape called them back.

"Be warned, Potter - any more night-time wanderings and I will personally make sure you are expelled. Good day to you."

He strode off in the direction of the staffroom.

Out on the stone steps, Harry turned to the others. "Right, here's what we've got to do," he whispered urgently. "One of us has got to keep an eye on Snape - wait outside the staff room and follow him if he leaves it. Hermione, you'd better do that."

"Why me?"

"It's obvious," said Ron. "You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Evans, you know." He put on a high voice, "'Oh Professor Evans, I'm so worried, I think I got question fourteen b wrong ...'"

"Oh, shut up," said Hermione, but she agreed to go and watch out for Snape.

"And we'd better stay outside the third-floor corridor," Harry told Ron. "Come on."

But that part of the plan didn't work. No sooner had they reached the door separating Fluffy from the rest of the school than Professor McGonagall turned up again and this time, she lost her temper.

"I suppose you think you're harder to get past than a pack of enchantments!" she stormed. "Enough of this nonsense! If I hear you've come anywhere near here again, I'll take another fifty points from Gryffindor! Yes, Weasley, from my own house!"

Harry and Ron went back to the common room, Harry had just said, "At least Hermione's on Snape's tail," when the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Hermione came in.

"I'm sorry, Harry!" she wailed. "Snape came out and asked me what I was doing, so I said I was waiting for Evans, and Snape went to get her, and I've only just got away, I don't know where Snape went."

"Well, that's it then, isn't it?" Harry said.

The other two stared at him. He was pale and his eyes were glittering.

"I'm going out of here tonight and I'm going to try and get to the Stone first."

"You're mad!" said Ron.

"You can't!" said Hermione. "After what McGonagall and Snape have said? You'll be expelled!"

"SO WHAT?" Harry shouted. "Don't you understand? If Snape gets hold of the Stone, Voldemort's coming back! Haven't you heard what it was like when he was trying to take over? There won't be any Hogwarts to get expelled from! He'll flatten it, or turn it into a school for the Dark Arts! Losing points doesn't matter anymore, can't you see? D'you think he'll leave you and your families alone if Gryffindor wins the house cup? If I get caught before I can get to the Stone, well, I'll have to go home and wait for Voldemort to find me there; it's only dying a bit later than I would have, because I'm never going over to the Dark Side, damn it, no matter what that Potter says! I'm going through that trapdoor tonight and nothing you two say is going to stop me!" He glared at them.

"You're right Harry," said Hermione in a small voice.

"I'll use the invisibility cloak again," said Harry.

"But will it cover all three of us?" said Ron.

"All - all three of us?"

"Oh, come off it, you don't think we'd let you go alone?"

"Of course not," said Hermione briskly. "How do you think you'd get to the Stone without us? I'd better go and look through my books, there might be something useful ... "

"But if we get caught, you two will be expelled, too."

"Not if I can help it," said Hermione grimly. "Your mother told me in secret that I got a hundred and twelve percent on her exam. They're not throwing me out after that."

After dinner the three of them sat nervously apart in the common room. Nobody bothered them; none of the Gryffindors had anything to say to Harry any more, after all, except for the Quidditch team. This was the first night he hadn't been upset by it. Hermione was skimming through all her notes, hoping to come across one of the enchantments they were about to try to break. Harry and Ron didn't talk much. Both of them were thinking about what they were about to do.

Slowly, the room emptied as people drifted off to bed.

"Better get the cloak," Ron muttered, as Lee Jordan finally left, stretching and yawning. Harry ran upstairs to their dark dormitory. He pulled out the cloak and then his eyes fell on the flute Hagrid had given him for Christmas. He pocketed it to use on Fluffy - he didn't feel much like singing.

He ran back down to the common room.

"We'd better put the cloak on here, and make sure it covers all three of us - if Filch spots one of our feet wandering along on its own - "

"What are you doing?" said a voice from the corner of the room. Neville appeared from behind an armchair, clutching Trevor the toad, who looked as though he'd been making another bid for freedom.

"Nothing, Neville, nothing," said Harry, hurriedly putting the cloak behind his back.

Neville stared at their guilty faces.

"You're going out again," he said.

"No, no, no," said Hermione. "No, we're not. Why don't you go to bed, Neville?"

Harry looked at the grandfather clock by the door. They couldn't afford to waste any more time, Snape might even now be playing Fluffy to sleep.

"You can't go out," said Neville, "you'll be caught again. Gryffindor will be in even more trouble."

"You don't understand," said Harry, "this is important."

But Neville was clearly steeling himself to do something desperate.

"I won't let you do it," he said, hurrying to stand in front of the portrait hole. "I'll - I'll fight you!"

"Neville, "Ron exploded, "get away from that hole and don't be an idiot - "

"Don't you call me an idiot!" said Neville. "I don't think you should be breaking any more rules! And you were the one who told me to stand up to people!"

"Yes, but not to us," said Ron in exasperation. "Neville, you don't know what you're doing."

He took a step forward and Neville dropped Trevor the toad, who leapt out of sight.

"Go on then, try and hit me!" said Neville, raising his fists. "I'm ready!"

Harry turned to Hermione.

"Do something," he said desperately.

Hermione stepped forward.

"Neville," she said, "I'm really, really sorry about this."

She raised her wand.

"Petrificus Totalus!" she cried, pointing it at Neville.

Neville's arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board.

Hermione ran to turn him over. Neville's jaws were jammed together so he couldn't speak. Only his eyes were moving, looking at them in horror.

"What've you done to him?" Harry whispered.

"It's the full Body-Bind," said Hermione miserably. "Oh, Neville, I'm so sorry."

"We had to, Neville, no time to explain," said Harry.

"You'll understand later, Neville," said Ron as they stepped over him and pulled on the invisibility cloak.

But leaving Neville lying motionless on the floor didn't feel like a very good omen. In their nervous state, every statue's shadow looked like Filch, every distant breath of wind sounded like Peeves swooping down on them.

At the foot of the first set of stairs, they spotted Mrs. Norris skulking near the top.

"Oh, let's kick her, just this once," Ron whispered in Harry's ear, but Harry shook his head. As they climbed carefully around her, Mrs. Norris turned her lamplike eyes on them, but didn't do anything.

They didn't meet anyone else until they reached the staircase up to the third floor. Peeves was bobbing halfway up, loosening the carpet so that people would trip.

"Who's there?" he said suddenly as they climbed toward him. He narrowed his wicked black eyes. "Know you're there, even if I can't see you. Are you ghoulie or ghostie or wee student beastie?"

He rose up in the air and floated there, squinting at them.

"Should call Filch, I should, if something's a-creeping around unseen."

Harry had a sudden idea.

"Peeves," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "the Bloody Baron has his own reasons for being invisible."

Peeves almost fell out of the air in shock. He caught himself in time and hovered about a foot off the stairs.

"So sorry, your bloodiness, Mr. Baron, Sir," he said greasily. "My mistake, my mistake - I didn't see you - of course I didn't, you're invisible - forgive old Peevsie his little joke, sir."

"I have business here, Peeves," croaked Harry. "Stay away from this place tonight."

"I will, sir, I most certainly will," said Peeves, rising up in the air again. "Hope your business goes well, Baron, I'll not bother you."

And he scooted off

"Brilliant, Harry!" whispered Ron.

A few seconds later, they were there, outside the third-floor corridor - and the door was already ajar.

"Well, there you are," Harry said quietly, "Snape's already got past Fluffy."

Seeing the open door somehow seemed to impress upon all three of them what was facing them. Underneath the cloak, Harry turned to the other two.

"If you want to go back, I won't blame you," he said. "You can take the cloak, I won't need it now."

"Don't be stupid," said Ron.

"We're coming," said Hermione.

Harry pushed the door open.

As the door creaked, low, rumbling growls met their ears. All three of the dog's noses sniffed madly in their direction, even though it couldn't see them.

"What's that at its feet?" Hermione whispered.

"Looks like a harp," said Ron. "Snape must have left it there."

"It must wake up the moment you stop playing," said Harry. "Well, here goes ... "

He put Hagrid's flute to his lips and blew. It wasn't really a tune, but from the first note the beast's eyes began to droop. Harry hardly drew breath. Slowly, the dog's growls ceased - it tottered on its paws and fell to its knees, then it slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

"Keep playing," Ron warned Harry as they slipped out of the cloak and crept toward the trapdoor. They could feel the dog's hot, smelly breath as they approached the giant heads.

"I think we'll be able to pull the door open," said Ron, peering over the dog's back. "Want to go first, Hermione?"

"No, I don't!"

"All right." Ron gritted his teeth and stepped carefully over the dog's legs. He bent and pulled the ring of the trapdoor, which swung up and open.

"What can you see?" Hermione said anxiously.

"Nothing - just black - there's no way of climbing down, we'll just have to drop."

Harry, who was still playing the flute, waved at Ron to get his attention and pointed at himself.

"You want to go first? Are you sure?" said Ron. "I don't know how deep this thing goes. Give the flute to Hermione so she can keep him asleep."

Harry handed the flute over. In the few seconds' silence, the dog growled and twitched, but the moment Hermione began to play, it fell back into its deep sleep.

Harry climbed over it and looked down through the trapdoor. There was no sign of the bottom.

He lowered himself through the hole until he was hanging on by his fingertips. Then he looked up at Ron and said, "If anything happens to me, don't follow. Go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, right?"

"Right," said Ron.

"See you in a minute, I hope ... "

And Harry let go. Cold, damp air rushed past him as he fell down, down, down and -

FLUMP. With a funny, muffled sort of thump he landed on something soft. He sat up and felt around, his eyes not used to the gloom. It felt as though he was sitting on some sort of plant.

"It's okay!" he called up to the light the size of a postage stamp, which was the open trapdoor, "it's a soft landing, you can jump!"

Ron followed right away. He landed, sprawled next to Harry.

"What's this stuff?" were his first words.

"Dunno, some sort of plant thing. I suppose it's here to break the fall. Come on, Hermione!"

The distant music stopped. There was a loud bark from the dog, but Hermione had already jumped. She landed on Harry's other side.

"We must be miles under the school," she said.

"Lucky this plant thing's here, really," said Ron.

"Lucky!" shrieked Hermione. "Look at you both!"

She leapt up and struggled toward a damp wall. She had to struggle because the moment she had landed, the plant had started to twist snakelike tendrils around her ankles. As for Harry and Ron, their legs had already been bound tightly in long creepers without their noticing.

Hermione had managed to free herself before the plant got a firm grip on her. Now she watched in horror as the two boys fought to pull the plant off them, but the more they strained against it, the tighter and faster the plant wound around them.

"Stop moving!" Hermione ordered them. "I know what this is - it's Devil's Snare!"

"Oh, I'm so glad we know what it's called, that's a great help," snarled Ron, leaning back, trying to stop the plant from curling around his neck.

"Shut up, I'm trying to remember how to kill it!" said Hermione.

"Well, hurry up, I can't breathe!" Harry gasped, wrestling with it as it curled around his chest.

"Devil's Snare, Devil's Snare ... what did Professor Sprout say? - it likes the dark and the damp - "

"So light a fire!" Harry choked.

"Yes - of course - but there's no wood!" Hermione cried, wringing her hands.

"HAVE YOU GONE MAD?" Ron bellowed. "ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?"

"Oh, right!" said Hermione, and she whipped out her wand, waved it, muttered something, and sent a jet of the same bluebell flames she had used on Snape at the plant. In a matter of seconds, the two boys felt it loosening its grip as it cringed away from the light and warmth.

Wriggling and flailing, it unraveled itself from their bodies, and they were able to pull free.

"Lucky you pay attention in Herbology, Hermione," said Harry as he joined her by the wall, wiping sweat off his face.

"Yeah," said Ron, "and lucky Harry doesn't lose his head in a crisis - 'there's no wood,' honestly."

"This way," said Harry, pointing down a stone passageway, which was the only way forward.

All they could hear apart from their footsteps was the gentle drip of water trickling down the walls. The passageway sloped downward, and Harry was reminded of Gringotts. With an unpleasant jolt of the heart, he remembered the dragons said to be guarding vaults in the wizards' bank. If they met a dragon, a fully-grown dragon - Norbert had been bad enough ...

"Can you hear something?" Ron whispered.

Harry listened. A soft rustling and clinking seemed to be coming from up ahead.

"Do you think it's a ghost?"

"I don't know ... sounds like wings to me."

"There's light ahead - I can see something moving."

They reached the end of the passageway and saw before them a brilliantly lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling all around the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy wooden door.

"Do you think they'll attack us if we cross the room?" said Ron.

"Probably," said Harry. "They don't look very vicious, but I suppose if they all swooped down at once ... well, there's no other choice ... I'll run."

He took a deep breath, covered his face with his arms, and sprinted across the room. He expected to feel sharp beaks and claws tearing at him any second, but nothing happened. He reached the door untouched. He pulled the handle, but it was locked.

The other two followed him. They tugged and heaved at the door, but it wouldn't budge, not even when Hermione tried her *Alohomora* charm.

"Now what?" said Ron.

"These birds ... they can't be here just for decoration," said Hermione.

They watched the birds soaring overhead, glittering - glittering?

"They're not birds!" Harry said suddenly. "They're keys! Winged keys - look carefully. So that must mean ... " he looked around the chamber while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. " ... yes - look! Broomsticks! We've got to catch the key to the door!"

"But there are hundreds of them!"

Ron examined the lock on the door.

"We're looking for a big, old-fashioned one - probably silver, like the handle."

They each seized a broomstick and kicked off into the air, soaring into the midst of the cloud of keys. They grabbed and snatched, but the bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one.

Not for nothing, though, was Harry the youngest Seeker in a century. He had a knack for spotting things other people didn't. After a minute's weaving about through the whirl of rainbow feathers, he noticed a large silver key that had a bent wing, as if it had already been caught and stuffed roughly into the keyhole.

"That one!" he called to the others. "That big one - there - no, there - with bright blue wings - the feathers are all crumpled on one side."

Ron went speeding in the direction that Harry was pointing, crashed into the ceiling, and nearly fell off his broom.

"We've got to close in on it!" Harry called, not taking his eyes off the key with the damaged wing. "Ron, you come at it from above - Hermione, stay below and stop it from going down and I'll try and catch it. Right, NOW!"

Ron dived, Hermione rocketed upward, the key dodged them both, and Harry streaked after it; it sped toward the wall, Harry leaned forward and with a nasty, crunching noise, pinned it against the stone with one hand. Ron and Hermione's cheers echoed around the high chamber.

They landed quickly, and Harry ran to the door, the key struggling in his hand. He rammed it into the lock and turned - it worked. The moment the lock had clicked open, the key took flight again, looking very battered now that it had been caught twice.

"Ready?" Harry asked the other two, his hand on the door handle. They nodded. He pulled the door open.

The next chamber was so dark they couldn't see anything at all. But as they stepped into it, light suddenly flooded the room to reveal an astonishing sight.

They were standing on the edge of a huge chessboard, behind the black chessmen, which were all taller than they were and carved from what looked like black stone. Facing them, way across the chamber, were the white pieces. Harry, Ron and Hermione shivered slightly - the towering white chessmen had no faces.

"Now what do we do?" Harry whispered.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" said Ron. "We've got to play our way across the room."

Behind the white pieces they could see another door.

"How?" said Hermione nervously.

"I think," said Ron, "we're going to have to be chessmen."

He walked up to a black knight and put his hand out to touch the knight's horse. At once, the stone sprang to life. The horse pawed the ground and the knight turned his helmeted head to look down at Ron.

"Do we - er - have to join you to get across?"

The black knight nodded. Ron turned to the other two.

"This needs thinking about ... " he said. "I suppose we've got to take the place of three of the black pieces ... "

Harry and Hermione stayed quiet, watching Ron think. Finally he said, "Now, don't be offended or anything, but neither of you are that good at chess - "

"We're not offended," said Harry quickly. "Just tell us what to do."

"Well, Harry, you take the place of that bishop, and Hermione, you go next to him instead of that castle."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to be a knight," said Ron.

The chessmen seemed to have been listening, because at these words a knight, a bishop, and a castle turned their backs on the white pieces and walked off the board, leaving three empty squares that Harry, Ron, and Hermione took.

"White always plays first in chess," said Ron, peering across the board. "Yes ... look ... "

A white pawn had moved forward two squares.

Ron started to direct the black pieces. They moved silently wherever he sent them. Harry's knees were trembling. What if they lost?

"Harry - move diagonally four squares to the right."

Their first real shock came when their other knight was taken. The white queen smashed him to the floor and dragged him off the board, where he lay quite still, facedown.

"Had to let that happen," said Ron, looking shaken. "Leaves you free to take that bishop, Hermione, go on."

Every time one of their men was lost, the white pieces showed no mercy. Soon there was a huddle of limp black players slumped along the wall. Twice, Ron only just noticed in time that Harry and Hermione were in danger. He himself darted around the board, taking almost as many white pieces as they had lost black ones.

"We're nearly there," he muttered suddenly. "Let me think let me think ... "

The white queen turned her blank face toward him.

"Yes ... " said Ron softly, "It's the only way ... I've got to be taken."

"NO!" Harry and Hermione shouted.

"That's chess!" snapped Ron. "You've got to make some sacrifices! I take one step forward and she'll take me - that leaves you free to checkmate the king, Harry!"

"But - "

"Do you want to stop Snape or not?"

"Ron - "

"Look, if you don't hurry up, he'll already have the Stone!"

There was no alternative.

"Ready?" Ron called, his face pale but determined. "Here I go - now, don't hang around once you've won."

He stepped forward, and the white queen pounced. She struck Ron hard across the head with her stone arm, and he crashed to the floor

- Hermione screamed but stayed on her square - the white queen dragged Ron to one side. He looked as if he'd been knocked out.

Shaking, Harry moved three spaces to the left.

The white king took off his crown and threw it at Harry's feet. They had won. The chessmen parted and bowed, leaving the door ahead clear. With one last desperate look back at Ron, Harry and Hermione charged through the door and up the next passageway.

"What if he's - ?"

"He'll be all right," said Harry, trying to convince himself. "What do you reckon's next?"

"We've had Sprout's, that was the Devil's Snare; Flitwick must've put charms on the keys; McGonagall transfigured the chessmen to make them alive; that leaves Quirrell's spell, and Snape's."

They had reached another door.

"All right?" Harry whispered.

"Go on."

Harry pushed it open.

A disgusting smell filled their nostrils, making both of them pull their robes up over their noses. Eyes watering, they saw, flat on the floor in front of them, a troll even larger than the one they had tackled, out cold with a bloody lump on its head.

"I'm glad we didn't have to fight that one," Harry whispered as they stepped carefully over one of its massive legs. "Come on, I can't breathe."

He pulled open the next door, both of them hardly daring to look at what came next - but there was nothing very frightening in here, just a table with seven differently shaped bottles standing on it in a line.

"Snape's," said Harry. "What do we have to do?"

They stepped over the threshold, and immediately a fire sprang up behind them in the doorway. It wasn't ordinary fire either; it was purple. At the same instant, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onward. They were trapped.

"Look!" Hermione seized a roll of paper lying next to the bottles. Harry looked over her shoulder to read it:

*Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,
Two of us will help you, which ever you would find,
One among us seven will let you move ahead,
Another will transport the drinker back instead,
Two among our number hold only nettle wine,
Three of us are killers, waiting bidden in line.
Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:
First, however slyly the poison tries to hide
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;
Second, different are those who stand at either end,
But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;
Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;
Fourth, the second left and the second on the right
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.*

Hermione let out a great sigh and Harry, amazed, saw that she was smiling, the very last thing he felt like doing. "Brilliant," said Hermione.

"This isn't magic - it's logic - a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, they'd be stuck in here forever."

"But so will we, won't we?"

"Of course not," said Hermione. "Everything we need is here on this paper. Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us safely through the black fire, and one will get us back through the purple."

"But how do we know which to drink?"

"Give me a minute." Hermione read the paper several times. Then she walked up and down the line of bottles, muttering to herself and pointing at them. At last, she clapped her hands. "Got it," she said. "The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire - toward the Stone."

Harry looked at the tiny bottle.

"There's only enough there for one of us," he said. "That's hardly one swallow."

They looked at each other.

"Which one will get you back through the purple flames?"

Hermione pointed at a rounded bottle at the right end of the line.

"You drink that," said Harry. "No, listen, get back and get Ron. Grab brooms from the flying-key room, they'll get you out of the trapdoor and past Fluffy - go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, we need him. I might be able to hold Snape off for a while, but I'm no match for him, really."

"But Harry - what if You-Know-Who's with him?"

"Well - I was lucky once, wasn't I?" said Harry, pointing at his scar. "I might get lucky again."

Hermione's lip trembled, and she suddenly dashed at Harry and threw her arms around him.

"Hermione!"

"Harry - you're a great wizard, you know."

"I'm not as good as you," said Harry, very embarrassed, as she let go of him.

"Me!" said Hermione. "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things - friendship and bravery and - oh Harry - be careful!" She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"You drink first," said a particularly stunned Harry. "You are sure which is which, aren't you?"

"Positive," said Hermione. She took a long drink from the round bottle at the end, and shuddered.

"It's not poison?" said Harry anxiously.

"No - but it's like ice."

"Quick, go, before it wears off."

"Good luck - take care."

"GO!"

Hermione turned and walked straight through the purple fire.

Harry took a deep breath and picked up the smallest bottle. He turned to face the black flames.

"Here I come," he said, and he drained the little bottle in one gulp.

It was indeed as though ice was flooding his body. He put the bottle down and walked forward; he braced himself, saw the black flames licking his body, but couldn't feel them - for a moment he could see nothing but dark fire - then he was on the other side, in the last chamber.

There was already someone there - but it wasn't Snape. It wasn't even Voldemort.

It was Quirrell.

"You!" gasped Harry.

Quirrell smiled. His face wasn't twitching at all.

"Me," he said calmly. "I wondered whether I'd be meeting you here, Evans."

"But I thought - Snape - "

"Severus?" Quirrell laughed, and it wasn't his usual quivering treble, either, but cold and sharp. "Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?"

Harry couldn't take it in. This couldn't be true, it couldn't.

"But Snape tried to kill me!"

"No, no, no. I tried to kill you. Snape did something at the duel, when you *weren't* bitten by that cobra. I'm pretty sure that Snape was doing something to prevent the snake from getting any closer. You couldn't possibly have been that good at a spell you haven't even learned yet. I could hear him muttering, anyway. And those foolish boys at the beginning of the year. It would have been so easy. But they were able to fight off the spell enough ... "

"Snape was trying to save me? The Gryffindors were controlled?" Harry's head was spinning with this new information.

"Of course," said Quirrell coolly. "Not even Gryffindors are stupid enough to kill a first year on their own. And as for Snape - why do you think he wanted to referee your next match? He was trying to make sure I didn't do it again. Funny, really ... he needn't have bothered. I couldn't do anything with Dumbledore watching. All the other teachers thought Snape was trying to stop Gryffindor from winning,

he did make himself unpopular ... and what a waste of time, when after all that, I'm going to kill you tonight."

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry.

"You're too nosy to live, Evans. Scurrying around the school on Halloween like that, for all I knew you'd seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone."

"You let the troll in?"

"Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls - you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape, who already suspected me, went straight to the third floor to head me off - and not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn't even manage to bite Snape's leg off properly.

"Now, wait quietly, Evans. I need to examine this interesting mirror."

It was only then that Harry realized what was standing behind Quirrell. It was the Mirror of Erised.

"This mirror is the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell murmured, tapping his way around the frame. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this ... but he's in London ... I'll be far away by the time he gets back ... "

All Harry could think of doing was to keep Quirrell talking and stop him from concentrating on the mirror.

"I saw you and Snape in the forest - " he blurted out.

"Yes," said Quirrell idly, walking around the mirror to look at the back. "He was on to me by that time, trying to find out how far I'd got. He suspected me all along. Tried to frighten me - as though he could, when I had Lord Voldemort on my side ... "

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it.

"I see the Stone ... I'm presenting it to my master ... but where is it?"

Harry struggled against the ropes binding him, but they didn't give. He had to keep Quirrell from giving his whole attention to the mirror.

"But Snape always seemed to hate me so much."

"Oh, he does," said Quirrell casually, "heavens, yes. He was at Hogwarts with your father, didn't you know? They loathe each other. But he never wanted you dead."

"But I heard you a few days ago, sobbing - I thought Snape was threatening you ... "

For the first time, a spasm of fear flitted across Quirrell's face.

"Sometimes," he said, "I find it hard to follow my master's instructions - he is a great wizard and I am weak - "

"You mean he was there in the classroom with you?" Harry gasped.

"He is with me wherever I go," said Quirrell quietly. "I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it ... Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has had to be very hard on me." Quirrell shivered suddenly. "He does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to steal the stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He punished me ... decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me ... "

Quirrell's voice trailed away. Harry was remembering his trip to Diagon Alley - how could he have been so stupid? He'd seen Quirrell there that very day, shaken hands with him in the Leaky Cauldron.

Quirrell cursed under his breath. "I don't understand ... is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

Harry's mind was racing. *What I want more than anything else in the world at the moment*, he thought, *is to find the Stone before Quirrell*

does. So if I look in the mirror, I should see myself finding it - which means I'll see where it's hidden! But how can I look without Quirrell realizing what I'm up to?

He tried to edge to the left, to get in front of the glass without Quirrell noticing, but the ropes around his ankles were too tight: he tripped and fell over. Quirrell ignored him. He was still talking to himself.

"What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!"

And to Harry's horror, a voice answered, and the voice seemed to come from Quirrell himself

"Use the boy ... Use the boy ... "

Quirrell rounded on Harry.

"Yes - Evans - come here."

He clapped his hands once, and the ropes binding Harry fell off. Harry got slowly to his feet.

"Come here," Quirrell repeated. "Look in the mirror and tell me what you see."

Harry walked toward him.

I must lie, he thought desperately. *I must look and lie about what I see, that's all.*

Quirrell moved close behind him. Harry breathed in the funny smell that seemed to come from Quirrell's turban. He closed his eyes, stepped in front of the mirror, and opened them again.

He saw his reflection, pale and scared-looking at first. But a moment later, the reflection smiled at him. It put its hand into its pocket and pulled out a blood-red stone. It winked and put the Stone back in its pocket - and as it did so, Harry felt something heavy drop into his real pocket. Somehow - incredibly - he'd gotten the Stone.

"Well?" said Quirrell impatiently. "What do you see?"

Harry screwed up his courage. "I see myself shaking hands with Dumbledore," he invented. "I - I've won the house cup for Gryffindor."

Quirrell cursed again. "Get out of the way," he said. As Harry moved aside, he felt the Sorcerer's Stone against his leg. Dare he make a break for it?

But he hadn't walked five paces before a high voice spoke, though Quirrell wasn't moving his lips. "He lies ... He lies ... "

"Evans, come back here!" Quirrell shouted. "Tell me the truth! What did you just see?"

The high voice spoke again.

"Let me speak to him ... face-to-face ... "

"Master, you are not strong enough!"

"I have strength enough ... for this ... "

Harry felt as if Devil's Snare was rooting him to the spot. He couldn't move a muscle. Petrified, he watched as Quirrell reached up and began to unwrap his turban. What was going on? The turban fell away. Quirrell's head looked strangely small without it. Then he turned slowly on the spot.

Harry would have screamed, but he couldn't make a sound. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

"Harry Potter ... " it whispered.

Harry tried to take a step backward but his legs wouldn't move.

"See what I have become?" the face said. "Mere shadow and vapour ... I have form only when I can share another's body ... but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds ... Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks ... you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest ... and once I

have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own ... Now ... why don't you give me that Stone in your pocket?"

So he knew. The feeling suddenly surged back into Harry's legs. He stumbled backward.

"Don't be a fool," snarled the face. "Better save your own life and join me ... or you'll meet the same end as that stupid house elf did ... she was trying to protect you ... Now give me the Stone, unless you want her to have died in vain."

"NEVER!"

Harry sprang toward the flame door, but Voldemort screamed "SEIZE HIM!" and the next second, Harry felt Quirrell's hand close on his wrist. At once, a needle-sharp pain seared across Harry's scar; his head felt as though it was about to split in two; he yelled, struggling with all his might, and to his surprise, Quirrell let go of him. The pain in his head lessened - he looked around wildly to see where Quirrell had gone, and saw him hunched in pain, looking at his fingers - they were blistering before his eyes.

"Seize him! SEIZE HIM!" shrieked Voldemort again, and Quirrell lunged, knocking Harry clean off his feet, landing on top of him, both hands around Harry's neck - Harry's scar was almost blinding him with pain, yet he could see Quirrell howling in agony.

"Master, I cannot hold him - my hands - my hands!"

And Quirrell, though pinning Harry to the ground with his knees, let go of his neck and stared, bewildered, at his own palms - Harry could see they looked burned, raw, red, and shiny.

"Then kill him, fool, and be done!" screeched Voldemort.

Quirrell raised his hand to perform a deadly curse, but Harry, by instinct, reached up and grabbed Quirrell's face -

"AAAARGH!"

Quirrell rolled off him, his face blistering, too, and then Harry knew: Quirrell couldn't touch his bare skin, not without suffering terrible pain - his only chance was to keep hold of Quirrell, keep him in enough pain to stop him from doing a curse.

Harry jumped to his feet, caught Quirrell by the arm, and hung on as tight as he could. Quirrell screamed and tried to throw Harry off - the pain in Harry's head was building - he couldn't see - he could only hear Quirrell's terrible shrieks and Voldemort's yells of, "KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" and other voices, maybe in Harry's own head, crying, "Harry! Harry!"

He felt Quirrell's arm wrenched from his grasp, knew all was lost, and fell into blackness.

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Something gold was glinting just above him. The Snitch! He tried to catch it, but his arms were too heavy. He blinked. It wasn't the Snitch at all. It was a pair of glasses. He closed his eyes tightly and then opened them once more. The smiling face of Albus Dumbledore swam into view above him. Good afternoon, Harry."

Harry stared at him. Then he remembered: "Sir! The Stone! It was Quirrell! He's got the Stone! Sir, quick - "

"Calm yourself, dear boy, you are a little behind the times," said Dumbledore. "Quirrell does not have the Stone."

"Then who does? Sir, I - "

"Harry, please relax, or Madam Pomfrey will have me thrown out."

Harry swallowed and looked around him. He realized he must be in the hospital wing. He was lying in a bed with white linen sheets, and next to him was a table piled high with what looked like half the candy shop.

"Tokens from your friends and admirers," said Dumbledore, beaming. "What happened down in the dungeons between you and Professor Quirrell is a complete secret, so, naturally, the whole school knows. I

believe your friends Misters Fred and George Weasley were responsible for trying to send you a toilet seat. No doubt they thought it would amuse you. Madam Pomfrey, however, felt it might not be very hygienic, and confiscated it." He chuckled. "There are some Gryffindors feeling quite sheepish at the moment, and hoping to apologise to you."

"How long have I been in here?"

"Three days. Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Granger will be most relieved you have come round, they have been extremely worried."

"But sir, the Stone ... "

"I see you are not to be distracted. Very well, the Stone. Professor Quirrell did not manage to take it from you. I arrived in time to prevent that, although you were doing very well on your own, I must say."

"You got there? You got Hermione's owl?"

"We must have crossed in midair. No sooner had I reached London than it became clear to me that the place I should be was the one I had just left. I arrived just in time to pull Quirrell off you."

"It was you."

"I feared I might be too late."

"You nearly were, I couldn't have kept him off the Stone much longer - "

"Not the Stone, boy, you - the effort involved nearly killed you. For one terrible moment there, I was afraid it had. As for the Stone, it has been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" said Harry blankly. "But your friend - Nicolas Flamel - "

"Oh, you know about Nicolas?" said Dumbledore, sounding quite delighted. "You did do the thing properly, didn't you? Well, Nicolas and I have had a little chat, and agreed it's all for the best."

"But that means he and his wife will die, won't they?"

"They have enough Elixir stored to set their affairs in order and then, yes, they will die."

Dumbledore smiled at the look of amazement on Harry's face.

"To one as young as you, I'm sure it seems incredible, but to Nicolas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all - the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them."

Harry lay there, lost for words. Dumbledore hummed a little and smiled at the ceiling.

"Sir?" said Harry. "I've been thinking ... sir - even if the Stone's gone, Vol-, I mean, You-Know-Who - "

"Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

"Yes, sir. Well, Voldemort's going to try other ways of coming back, isn't he? I mean, he hasn't gone, has he?"

"No, Harry, he has not. He is still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share ... not being truly alive, he cannot be killed. He left Quirrell to die; he shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies. Nevertheless, Harry, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time - and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power."

Harry nodded, but stopped quickly, because it made his head hurt. Then he said, "Sir, there are some other things I'd like to know, if you can tell me ... things I want to know the truth about ... "

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. However, I shall answer your questions unless I have a very good reason not to, in which case I beg you'll forgive me. I shall not, of course, lie."

"Well ... why would he want to kill me?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I shall tell you one day, but today is not that day. You are not yet ready to hear the answer to that question." He raised a hand to forestall Harry's imminent complaint. "For much the same reason that Miss Tonks would not explain to you, I must hold off." He frowned. "I dislike it as much as Miss Tonks and you do. I will tell you once you have a better grounding in the concepts involved. I do apologise."

"Why was it that Quirrell couldn't touch me?"

"Love, Harry. There are many who love you. Your mother, your friends – I understand that Miss Granger even kissed you?" He blushed. "And most powerfully, the house elf who died before you somehow defeated him the first time. Mombi was willing to die for you, Harry. That sort of love leaves a lasting mark on your soul. It is a good mark to have, for it means that you have touched people in this world in a lasting way."

"Voldemort cannot understand love. He was injured, I believe, by your destruction of Quirinius."

"And sir, there's one last thing ... "

"Just the one?"

"How did I get the Stone out of the mirror?"

"Ah, now, I'm glad you asked me that. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and me, that's saying something. You see, only one who wanted to find the Stone - find it, but not use it - would be able to get it, otherwise they'd just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life. My brain surprises even me sometimes ... Now, enough questions. I suggest you make a start on these sweets. Ah! Bettie Bott's Every flavour Beans! I was unfortunate enough in my

youth to come across a vomit-flavoured one, and since then I'm afraid I've rather lost my liking for them - but I think I'll be safe with a nice lemon flavoured one, don't you?"

He smiled and popped the golden-brown bean into his mouth. "Ah, butter. Not what I would expect, but it could be worse. I could have taken that toffee one and found it to be ear wax flavoured."

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Harry made his way down to the end-of-year feast alone that night. He had been held up by Madam Pomfrey's fussing about, insisting on giving him one last checkup, so the Great Hall was already full. It was decked out in the Slytherin colors of green and silver to celebrate Slytherin's winning the house cup for the seventh year in a row. A huge banner showing the Slytherin serpent covered the wall behind the High Table.

When Harry walked in there was a sudden hush, and then everybody started talking loudly at once. He slipped into a seat between Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor table and tried to ignore the fact that people were standing up to look at him.

Fortunately, Dumbledore arrived moments later. The babble died away.

"Another year gone!" Dumbledore said cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were ... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts ...

"Now, as I understand it, the house cup here needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two points; in third, Gryffindor, with three hundred and eighty-seven; Ravenclaw has four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy-two."

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out from the Slytherin table. Harry could see Draco Malfoy banging his goblet on the table. It was a sickening sight.

"Yes, yes, well done, Slytherin, well done," said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

The room went very still. The Slytherins' smiles faded a little.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore. "I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes ...

"First - to Mr. Ronald Weasley ... "

Ron went purple in the face; he looked like a radish with a bad sunburn.

" ... for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house twenty-five points."

Gryffindor cheers nearly raised the bewitched ceiling; the stars overhead seemed to quiver. Percy could be heard telling the other prefects, "My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall's giant chess set!"

At last there was silence again.

"Second - to Miss Hermione Granger ... for the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor house twenty-five points."

Hermione buried her face in her arms; Harry strongly suspected she had burst into tears. Gryffindors up and down the table were beside themselves.

"Third - to Mr. Harry Evans ... " said Dumbledore. The room went deadly quiet. " ... for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house thirty-five points."

The din was deafening. Those who could add up while yelling themselves hoarse knew that Gryffindor now had four hundred and seventy-two points - exactly the same as Slytherin. They had tied for the house cup - if only Dumbledore had given Harry just one more point.

Dumbledore raised his hand. The room gradually fell silent.

"There are all kinds of courage," said Dumbledore, smiling. "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom."

Someone standing outside the Great Hall might well have thought some sort of explosion had taken place, so loud was the noise that erupted from the Gryffindor table. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood up to yell and cheer as Neville, white with shock, disappeared under a pile of people hugging him. He had never won so much as a point for Gryffindor before. Harry, still cheering, nudged Ron in the ribs and pointed at Malfoy, who couldn't have looked more stunned and horrified if he'd just had the Body-Bind Curse put on him.

"Which means," Dumbledore called over the storm of applause, for even Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were celebrating the downfall of Slytherin, "we need a little change of decoration."

He clapped his hands. In an instant, the green hangings became scarlet and the silver became gold; the huge Slytherin serpent vanished and a towering Gryffindor lion took its place. Snape was shaking Professor McGonagall's hand, with a horrible, forced smile. He caught Harry's eye and Harry knew at once that Snape's feelings toward him hadn't changed one jot. This didn't worry Harry. It seemed as though life would be back to normal next year, or as normal as it ever was at Hogwarts.

It was the best evening of Harry's life, better than winning at Quidditch, or Christmas, or knocking out mountain trolls ... he would never, ever forget tonight.

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Harry had almost forgotten that the exam results were still to come, but come they did. To their great surprise, both he and Ron passed with good marks; Hermione, of course, had the best grades of the first years. Even Neville scraped through, his good Herbology mark making up for his abysmal Potions one. They had hoped that Goyle, who was almost as stupid as he was mean, might be thrown out, but he had passed, too. It was a shame, but as Ron said, you couldn't have everything in life.

And suddenly, their wardrobes were empty, their trunks were packed, Neville's toad was found lurking in a corner of the toilets; notes were handed out to all students, warning them not to use magic over the holidays ("I always hope they'll forget to give us these," said Fred Weasley sadly); Hagrid was there to take them down to the fleet of boats that sailed across the lake; they were boarding the Hogwarts Express; talking and laughing as the countryside became greener and tidier; eating Bettie Bott's Every flavour Beans as they sped past Muggle towns; pulling off their wizard robes and putting on jackets and coats; pulling into platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross Station.

It took quite a while for them all to get off the platform. A wizened old guard was up by the ticket barrier, letting them go through the gate in twos and threes so they didn't attract attention by all bursting out of a solid wall at once and alarming the Muggles.

He found the Weasleys waiting for him, as well as the Marauders. Ginny was still looking sad, so Harry walked over to her. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said quietly.

"Hey, I've forgiven you, once I understood where the whole thing was coming from. You need to forgive yourself." He pulled her into a hug, and then took a page from Hermione's book and kissed Ginny on the cheek.

It did not have the result he was expecting, though – she burst into tears. "That doesn't bode well for your kissing skills, mate!" Fred shouted.

"Shut it, you," he yelled back. No matter what, he could not get a response from Ginny. He finally looked up at Molly and said, "I'll be visiting over the summer. Maybe I can get her to believe that I forgave her months ago then."

He turned to Hermione. "Make sure you write! Maybe we can invite you over some time. A little time at the Burrow and a little time with us!" He gave her a hug. "Thank you for being there and believing in me."

“It was easy, Harry. I'll see what I can do as far as this summer is concerned.” With that, she was through the barrier and off with her parents. Harry smiled at Sirius and the rest and said, “Well, shall we be away?” They each touched the permanent Portkey that took them to Number 12 Grimmauld Place and they were away, Harry's first year complete.

Chapter 7

Harry, Ron and Hermione sat heavily in the compartment. They had almost missed the train when the barrier between platforms closed early, but Hermione had quickly figured out a way to contact the station master on the wizarding side. He had let them through, after chasing away a house elf.

"I wish that house elf could explain what he's doing. He didn't want me to return to school this year, for fear of my life. He showed up during the summer to try to convince me not to come back to Hogwarts." He scowled. "What does that say for his treatment when he's willing to go as far as possible to break the rules without breaking them?"

"Beats me, chum," Ron said. "I wonder who he belongs to?"

"Belongs to?" Hermione asked dangerously.

"Hold on," Harry said quickly. "Get all the facts before you go off. Talk to my mother about house elves, for example. Remember that she's also a Muggleborn." Hermione scowled, but nodded her agreement.

Hermione was causing Harry some problems, and they had nothing to do with her attitudes. Ever since the day at the swimming pool in the Hogsmeade house that belonged to Sirius, he'd begun to be just as nervous around her as he was around Angelina. The problem was that she had been growing during the school year and over the weeks of the summer that he hadn't seen her, so he hadn't noticed that she had developed A Figure. Her one piece suit had made this quite obvious. The problem Harry had was that he didn't understand why he was getting nervous around her and Angelina. They were his friends – why should looking different cause him to get nervous?

"Harry, why are you blushing?" Hermione asked, amusement on her face. "Did you remember something from this summer?"

His blush got worse as her question reminded him of accidentally walking into the wrong changing room and getting a view of her completely bare back. She'd been completely nude. He had backed

out of the door at a speed he'd only ever reached on his broom, murmuring apologies, and had refused to come out of his room for the rest of the day. It had taken Hermione coming to him the next day and dragging him out to get him to face everyone. He'd been terribly worried that he might lose her friendship over that incident, and even there, he wasn't sure why. She bothered him, for some reason, and he really wanted to know why. "Yes, I am. Thank you for forgiving me," he said softly.

She laughed. "You're still worried about that? Think how you'd have been if I'd been facing you!" she smirked. He twitched slightly. He liked that idea, for some reason, but that reason escaped him for the time being.

For that matter, he'd noticed that he was having the same reaction to Ginny, who had just begun to develop some curves. *Am I cursed to react this way to every girl I'm friends with? Notice that they're growing up and get nervous around them?* He scowled to himself.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked.

He thought quickly about something else – anything else – that Ron could accept, since he didn't think that Ron would take too kindly to Harry paying enough attention to Ginny that he knew that her shirts fit differently now. Suddenly it struck him. "Something is going on with my uncles. For some reason, none of them could come with me to the platform today. I understand that they have lives, but it hurt a little, you know?" He sighed. "But I'm just whining. They wouldn't do it without good reason."

"You're allowed to hurt, Harry," Hermione said softly.

"Not in public," he replied. "The Bastard Who Lived is supposed to be above all that as a hero." Her rolled eyes spoke far more eloquently as to her opinion on that matter than anything else she might have contemplated saying.

The door opened and Ginny stood outside, looking nervous. "Ginny!" Harry said. "Come on in!" He pulled her into the compartment and gave her a hug that she returned only half-heartedly. "What's wrong, Ginny?"

"I just ... it may have been a bad idea for me to come here ... I ..."

"I still consider you my girlfriend," he said quietly. "Nothing has changed that."

"I betrayed you!" she wailed suddenly. "I knew you better than that!"

"Still worried about the parselmouth thing?" he asked softly. "I forgave you for that. When I had it explained what the prevailing attitude was ... well, I understood what had happened. You learned it from your Mum and Dad, who probably learned it from theirs, and so on. You realised your error, and I forgave you. Simple as that." He hugged her again.

"I don't deserve forgiveness," she sniffed.

"Neither do I. I'm a Death Eater bastard, remember? I'm supposed to turn evil some day. Sirius distracted me one day on my way to change for our pool, and I walked in on Hermione while she was changing into her swimsuit. By rights she should have broken my nose and sworn never to speak to me again. Instead, she forgave me, even though she shouldn't have."

"But yours was a mistake!" Ginny said. "Mine was ..."

"Based on insufficient information,' as Uncle Remus would say. You changed your mind when you thought about it. Simple. You deserve to be forgiven."

"I don't think so," she said softly.

"And Hermione shouldn't forgive me for barging in on her like that, but she did. And I'm grateful that I haven't lost my friend." He hugged her a third time. "I'm still willing to be your boyfriend, if you want," he said as softly as she had spoken.

She shivered against him. "Please?" she asked, her voice quavering.

This, of course, was the time that Fate decreed that Harry and company should be paid a visit by Draco Malfoy. "Well, well, Potter –

scraping the bottom of the barrel for girlfriends, eh? A Mudblood and a pauper.”

“I should just kill you for the insult to Hermione, but I really don't need the Order of Merlin that it would give me to do so. Instead, I'll just say that I refuse to get into a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent – namely you – so you might as well leave now.”

“How dare you!” Malfoy shrieked, rather girlishly.

“I dare a lot, brother dear. Remember, you love pointing out so much that I am a bastard by a Death Eater.” Harry suddenly cheered up. “You may well *be* my half-brother. You'd get to keep the family fortune, at least most of it, but I could make a claim for some of it. Wouldn't that be fun, brother dear? We simply must contact *your* mother and see if we can make a day of it someday – getting to know the family and all.”

Draco was blinking in confusion by the time Harry was finished, and left the compartment without another word, lest Harry start to speak again. Harry waited for a long moment, hearing the door to the next car open and close, before he began to laugh a hearty laugh. “I do so love doing that to him. As Mum would say, 'It's like flattening a fly with a Ford'.”

“That's not a common phrase,” Hermione said with a frown. “I think she made it up.”

“So what if she did? It's certainly descriptive enough, isn't it?” Hermione had to agree with that statement.

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The rest of the trip was uneventful, and while Harry and the others followed the tradition and did not tell Ginny how the Sorting took place, Harry promised her that it wasn't painful – for long. He winked at her when no one was looking, so she put on the proper fearful face, but whispered a thank you in his ear when she hugged him as they got off the train.

As they took the carriages to the school, Ron asked, "You never told me – did you ever get the invisibility cloak back to Potter? Or do you still have it?"

"It got back to him in a roundabout way. I convinced a house elf to drop it off for him when he wasn't in his rooms."

"How did you get it in the first place?" Hermione whispered, glaring at Ron for not doing the same.

"That, my dear girl, is a secret. I may need to do it again someday, although I seriously doubt it, given one of my birthday presents from Sirius."

Both Ron and Hermione stared at him in shock. "You mean -" she finally asked.

"Cor, those things are really rare, Harry!" Ron whispered.

"I think it came from the Black family vaults. He discovered that I want to start doing some mischief this year, so he decided to help me out. Gave me the directions on how to build something else, too, but that's going to take me most of the year to build. It'll be great from then on."

They pulled to the front of the school and exited, quickly making their way into the Great Hall. They sat at the Gryffindor table and then looked toward the head table, where they received a shock. Seated there were all four Marauders, plus Lily. Professor Snape had a look that seemed to say that there was a particularly pungent odour plaguing him.

The Sorting couldn't happen fast enough for them, because they knew that the feast and then introductions would happen next. As expected, Ginny became the seventh Weasley to end up in Gryffindor, and Harry gave her a huge smile as she went past him.

The feast was as they expected, and all too soon was finished, and the dessert course as well. The Headmaster stood and clapped his hands once for the announcements. "Once again, we begin another year. Before I send you off to your respective Houses, I have some announcements that must be delivered. As I have said for many

years, the Forbidden Forest is just that – forbidden. There are many dangerous things in there, and to enter without supervision is likely to be fatal.”

“The list of forbidden objects can be found posted on Mr. Filch's office door. The list has grown from last year, so it would be a good idea to peruse the list at least once.”

“Now we come to the introductions of our teachers. As those in third year and above remember, Madam Hooch is our flying instructor. She has returned to us this year.” A woman in yellow robes stood and nodded once to the students to some scattered applause. Harry noticed her hawk-like eyes. “Last year's flying instructor, Professor James Potter has agreed to take on the position of Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts.” He stood and nodded as well. There were sighs from some of the upper-class girls, and Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Professor Binns has decided that he has taken enough time, and has chosen to move on to the next great adventure. We will miss him, but I believe that we have found a suitable replacement, although one less likely to cause his students to fall asleep, in Professor Sirius Black.” Sirius stood and winked impishly at Harry. Several of his older classmates giggled at the new teacher.

“Professor Snape has realised that he has needed assistance in teaching, what with the many other duties that he performs for Hogwarts, and is now teaching only the N.E.W.T. level classes. In his place in the lower classes, leading up to the O.W.L.s, will be Professor Peter Pettigrew. Some of you may remember him tutoring you last year.”

“Lastly, but most certainly not to be considered least, we have replaced our old Muggle Studies teacher, since Miss Wilhemina Murray has chosen to move on to other pursuits.” Hermione's head shot up in surprise. “I am certain that Professor Snape wishes her well in her new profession, given their notable ... disagreements. In Miss Murray's place we have hired Professor Remus Lupin to teach the class.”

“Good heavens, the Marauders ride again,” Harry whispered to himself. “As teachers! Will the school still be standing at the end of the year?”

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As they were leaving for their dormitories, Hermione asked Percy, “Do you have any idea how old the previous Muggle Studies teacher was?”

“I’m honestly not sure. She looked fairly young, but you know how we age. I think I heard that she’s older than Professor McGonagall.”

“Why are you asking, Hermione?” Harry asked.

“I just recognised the name, that’s all,” she said evasively.

“Right,” Ron said, the scepticism evident in his voice.

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School started the way that it always did – too soon for most students excepting the Ravenclaws and Hermione Granger. The week went quite well, even with Professor Potter deciding to use Harry for a practice dummy for his spells. Harry managed to lose five points from Gryffindor because he began to cast protective spells to keep from being hit, since the Stinging Hex that the professor was cast was beginning to get painful, rather than just stinging.

Saturday morning, however, Harry was roughly shaken awake at six a.m. by Oliver Wood. “What are you doing, Wood?” he asked bleary-eyed.

“Quidditch practice, Evans!” he said. “We need to start early this year! Get your gear and get down to the pitch!” With that, he disappeared again.

Harry lurched to his feet and found his Quidditch gear. He wrote a quick note to Ron to let him know where he’d gone, and then left, his Nimbus over his shoulder.

When he reached the pitch, he realised that he must have actually fallen asleep in his travel there, since he honestly couldn't remember anything past exiting the tower. He was arriving at the same time as the twins, one of whom asked him, "Harry, did you know that you snore when you sleep?" He was still too tired to tell them apart.

"I do now," he said. "When did you hear me doing that?"

"On your walk here. You fell asleep on your feet, apparently," Fred (he thought) said.

"Wish I could do that," George (he supposed) answered.

When the team saw Wood enter the changing room carrying boards under his arms, they groaned. "Wood if this was just a strategy session, why did we have to get dressed for flying?" Angelina asked. "We could have talked in the tower."

"Quiet, Johnson," he barked. "I'm going to go over our new tactics, and then we'll practice them. If you want to show up in your night clothes to practice, feel free, but we're going to practice."

Harry blushed furiously at the thought of the pretty fourteen year old in her nightgown, especially since he'd seen her once last year in it in the common room, and was astonished by the amount of thigh that it showed. The fact that it had showed any thigh at all had surprised him. "Hey, Angie," Katie snickered. "I think Evans likes the idea of you practising in your nightie. But he'd likely fly into a post instead of catching the Snitch."

Alicia whispered something in Angelina's ear that no one else could hear, which made Angelina blush and squeak out a simple, "Alicia!"

"Enough!" Wood thundered. He pulled out the first board, which had a drawing of a Quidditch pitch on it with a series of arrows, and tapped it with his wand. The arrows began to move in a complicated sequence, and he began to talk about his plans, spending an inordinate amount of time on various aspects of it. It took about twenty minutes or so for Oliver to go through the first board, after which he moved to the second, which had even more information. By

the time that he was done, they were quite certain that they had missed breakfast. "Is that clear? Any questions?"

"I've got a question, Oliver," said George, who had woken with a start. "Why couldn't you have told us all this yesterday when we were awake?"

Wood wasn't pleased. "Now, listen here, you lot," he said, glowering at them all. "We should have won the Quidditch cup last year. We're easily the best team. But unfortunately – owing to circumstances beyond our control -"

"Well, I certainly couldn't get up out of the bed I was recuperating in to play. Considering that we would have had to forfeit if I'd stayed off the team, then you had to forfeit, since Gryffindor had no Seeker."

"No, we played anyway, and got our heads handed to us."

"How? All I do is hover around and look for a little golden ball with wings! How did my not being there destroy our chances? Gain enough points and even if they catch the Snitch, we can still win."

Fred cleared his throat and spoke, although he seemed loath to take his head from Alicia's shoulder. "Actually Harry, with you there, it makes another target that the other teams like to stop at all costs. Without you, they aimed for us, and we suffered the worst loss any team has had for over three hundred years."

"You mean to tell me that without me here, even the *Cannons* could have beaten Gryffindor?" Harry asked incredulously.

George snorted into his hand before answering, "Well, that may be going a bit too far, but then again, maybe not. We needed you at the game, Harry."

"Well, I'll do my best, but no promises. Gods alone know if Voldemort is going to show up again this year." The others shuddered as he mentioned the name.

"This year, we're training harder than ever before, in case Harry is laid up again ... Okay, let's go and put our new theories into practice!"

Wood shouted, seizing his broomstick and leading the way out of the locker rooms. Stiff legged and still yawning, his team followed.

They had been in the locker room so long that the sun was up completely now, although remnants of mist hung over the grass in the stadium. As Harry walked onto the field, he saw Ron and Hermione sitting in the stands.

"Aren't you finished yet?" called Ron incredulously.

"Haven't even started," said Harry, looking jealously at the toast and marmalade Ron and Hermione had brought out of the Great Hall. "Wood's been teaching us new moves."

He mounted his broomstick and kicked at the ground, soaring up into the air. The cool morning air whipped his face, waking him far more effectively than Wood's long talk. It felt wonderful to be back on the Quidditch field. He soared right around the stadium at full speed, racing Fred and George.

They heard a clicking noise as they flew, and Harry noticed the young Gryffindor who seemed to have a camera fetish ... *Creevey, I think it is*, he mused. *Guy's so excited, he's taking pictures of everything in the school – the ghosts, Peeves, the armour, even me a few times. Funny watching Peeves mugging for the camera.*

"What's going on?" said Wood, frowning, as he skimmed through the air toward Harry. "Why's that first year taking pictures? I don't like it. He could be a Slytherin spy, trying to find out about our new training program."

"He's in Gryffindor," said Harry before Wood could grab Creevey and fly him back up to the school.

"And the Slytherins don't need a spy, Oliver," said George as he joined the two.

"What makes you say that?" said Wood testily.

"Because they're here in person," said George, pointing.

Several people in green robes were walking onto the field, broomsticks in their hands.

"I don't believe it!" Wood hissed in outrage. "I booked the field for today! We'll see about this!"

Wood shot toward the ground, landing rather harder than he meant to in his anger, staggering slightly as he dismounted. Harry, Fred, and George followed.

"Flint!" Wood bellowed at the Slytherin Captain. "This is our practice time! We got up specially! You can clear off now!"

Marcus Flint was even larger than Wood. He had a look of trollish cunning on his face as he replied, "Plenty of room for all of us, Wood."

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie had come over, too. There were no girls on the Slytherin team, who stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the Gryffindors, leering to a man.

"But I booked the field!" said Wood, positively spitting with rage. "I booked it!"

"Ah," said Flint. "But I've got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. *'I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch field owing to the need to train their new Seeker.'*"

"You've got a new Seeker?" said Wood, distracted. "Where?"

And from behind the six large figures before them came a seventh, smaller boy, smirking all over his pale, pointed face. It was Draco Malfoy.

"Congratulations!" Harry said. "It'll be wonderful to beat you in yet another way!"

"Don't be so sure about that, Potter," Malfoy said with an oily smirk. "My father purchased the Slytherin team new brooms. Brand new on

the market. Nimbus Two Thousand and One. Has the old Two Thousand beat by a rather large margin."

Flint grimaced in what Harry could only assume was meant to be his own oily grin. "Let's not even talk about the Cleansweeps," he said, motioning to the old Cleansweep Five's that Fred and George were holding.

"Ah, Draco," Harry said. "It's so nice that your father bought you a Quidditch team for your birthday. It's a pity that he didn't have the money to buy you a real one." In a more serious tone, he added, "I think you'll also discover that Quidditch is more than who has the fastest broom."

"Not when you're a Seeker, Potter," Draco sneered.

"How little you know about such things," Hermione said, beginning a rant, but Draco cut her off.

"And how little I care about anything *you* have to say, you Mudblood bitch," he snarled. He didn't get any further as Harry whipped out his wand and yelled "*Expelliarmus!*" Draco's broom shot into the air while Malfoy shot back about fifty feet, skidding to a stop in the wet grass. It was only when he landed that they realised that Ron had cast a spell as well, since Draco began to retch, spewing up slugs.

The Gryffindor team left the Slytherins to clean up after them.

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Things went rather well for the next few weeks, even in Defence, where Professor Potter seemed to enjoy using Harry as the target of choice when showing off new spells, especially the slightly embarrassing ones. On Halloween itself, he found himself the recipient of an accidental *Evanescio* cast by someone in the class, and didn't quite cover his nakedness in time. There were whistles from some of the girls in the room, and Hermione was blushing so heavily that she seemed likely to set her shirt on fire.

Getting his dignity about himself as best he could, he said, "I thought it was October, not April. Nice prank, but can I have my clothes

back?" His clothes were returned to the sound of some of the girls complaining.

As they left class, Harry pulled the still blushing Hermione aside. "Now we're even," he said with a grin.

"No," she squeaked. "I saw more than you did." She tried to run away in embarrassment, but he wouldn't let her.

"It's all right, Hermione. I saw something I shouldn't have in the summer, and now you've gotten a similar view. I'm embarrassed, but I'm not angry."

"You should be," she said in a small voice. "It was my spell."

"Did you want me to be naked in front of the class?" he asked her with a smile on his face. She merely squeaked again and tore free from him, running madly down the hall.

By the time dinner came around, she seemed more able to handle herself around Harry, and the dinner seemed to go well, except for the ribbing Harry took from the other students. His Quidditch teammates were the worst, with Katie saying, "You'll simply have to show us what all the fuss is about later, Harry."

He blushed, even knowing that she was trying to embarrass him, but bulled forward, saying something he'd heard before, although he didn't know what was meant by it. "You couldn't handle me, Katie."

The sound of the laughter and thumping on the Gryffindor table brought grins from most of the head table.

It was also at that feast that another problem was averted. Apparently Professor Snape had decided to use every advantage that he could to make sure that his Slytherins won, so he gave the Slytherin team notes to allow them to take over every single Gryffindor practice time. Word had, of course, gotten back to the teachers, but he had been within the letter of the by-laws to do it, so there was no disciplinary action that could be taken.

Lily, on the other hand, had other ideas. "Hey Severus," she said conversationally, knowing that the nearest students would be able to hear her, "I see that you've finally decided to make the fight for the Quidditch Cup interesting. Trust me, from watching your team play last year, you need the practice."

Harry, who was close enough to hear, since the room seemed to have gone quiet, said, "True, Professor Evans. I've played against them. Even with them using all our practice times, we'll likely beat them rather severely. After all, they're using Nimbus 2001 brooms, and don't know how to properly handle a broomstick."

"Unlike you, Harry," purred Angelina. Harry simply put his head forward in amused resignation, dropping his forehead directly into a pudding, amidst laughter.

"He's right," James Potter said. "I've watched your boys play. You need the practice time, Professor." Snape responded by storming from the room.

The feast ended with people straggling out to head back to their dorms or to the library or such places, since it was still early enough to not worry about curfew quite yet. The Trio, as they were already being called around the school, headed toward the entrance hall to step out to look at the stars. It was as they approached the hall that Harry heard the voice.

"...soo hungry...for so long..."

He shook his head, thinking he'd imagined it. He'd almost convinced himself that he had imagined it when he heard, "...find food...must find food now..."

The sound was moving, so he began to follow it. It was moving away – moving upward. A mixture of fear and excitement gripped him as he stared at the dark ceiling. How could it be moving upward? Was it a phantom, to whom stone ceilings didn't matter?

"This way," he shouted, and he began to run, up the stairs, sprinting up the marble staircase to the first floor, Ron and Hermione clattering behind him.

"Harry, what're we -" Hermione asked.

"SHH!"

Harry strained his ears. Distantly, from the floor above, and growing fainter still, he heard the voice: "...I smell blood...I SMELL BLOOD!"

"It's going to kill someone!" he shouted, and ignoring Ron's and Hermione's bewildered faces, he ran up the next flight of steps three at a time, trying to listen over his own pounding footsteps.

He hurtled around the whole of the second floor, Ron and Hermione panting behind him, not stopping until they turned a corner into the last, deserted passage.

"Harry, what was that all about?" said Ron, wiping sweat off his face. "I couldn't hear anything..."

But Hermione gave a sudden gasp, pointing down the corridor.

"Look!"

Something was shining on the wall ahead. They approached slowly, squinting through the darkness. Foot-high words had been daubed on the wall between two windows, shimmering in the light cast by the flaming torches.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

"What's that thing -- hanging underneath?" said Ron, a slight quiver in his voice.

As they edged nearer, Harry almost slipped -- there was a large puddle of water on the floor; Ron and Hermione grabbed him, and they inched toward the message, eyes fixed on a dark shadow beneath it. All three of them realized what it was at once, and leapt backward with a splash.

Mrs. Norris, the caretaker's cat, was hanging by her tail from the torch bracket. She was stiff as a board, her eyes wide and staring.

"Hermione, run and get a professor!" As he turned to see her simply staring in shock at the wall and Mrs. Norris, he shouted, "NOW!" She shook herself free and started to head back toward the entrance hall, but she could hear the feast just getting out.

"Professors!" she shrieked. "We need help up here!" This, of course, brought pretty much the entire student body toward the sound of her voice. The chatter, the bustle and the noise died suddenly as the people in front spotted the hanging cat. Harry and Ron stood alone in the middle of the corridor, as silence fell among the mass of students pressing forward to see the grisly sight. Harry was checking on Mrs. Norris as best he could, to see if she were still alive.

Then someone shouted through the quiet. "Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!" It was Draco Malfoy. He had pushed to the front of the crowd, his cold eyes alive, his usually bloodless face flushed, as he grinned at the sight of the hanging, immobile cat.

The next one along proved to be pure bad luck, working against Harry. Drawn by the shouting and screaming, Argus Filch rounded the corner. "What's going on here? What's going on?"

He saw Mrs. Norris and fell back, clutching his face in horror.

"My cat! My cat! What's happened to Mrs. Norris?" he shrieked.

And his popping eyes fell on Harry. "You!" he screeched. "You! You've murdered my cat! You've killed her! I'll kill you! I'll -" He leaped forward and slammed Harry into the wall, his hands tightening around Harry's neck. Harry clawed weakly at the caretaker's grip, but was rapidly losing consciousness.

"Argus!" was the last thing that he heard before he lost his battle to stay awake.

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He came to in the hospital wing. "I could really hate this place if I tried," he murmured softly. Well, gagged loudly is more correct. His throat felt raw and horribly abused, and he suddenly remembered why he was in there.

"How are you feeling, dear boy?" the Headmaster said from nearby.

"Like someone tried to choke me to death," he rasped.

"Yes, well, Mr. Filch is being given a chance to rethink some of his attitudes right now. We have found that Mrs. Norris is merely petrified and not dead, so we must wait for the mandrakes that you students have been working with mature, at which point they will be used to reverse the effects."

"Professor!" he choked out. "There's a god-awfully large snake in the walls here! That's how we ended up in that hallway – I could hear it saying that it was hungry and hadn't eaten in a long time. It smelled blood." He stopped. "That writing in the hallway wasn't paint, was it?"

"No, unfortunately, it was not. Whomever did these things has apparently murdered every rooster in Hagrid's care, and used their blood for the message."

He felt himself pale. "Are we sure it was chicken blood?"

"Yes, Harry, that we are sure of," the Headmaster said, pleased at Harry's concern for his fellow students.

"Um, you said that he was being given a chance to rethink his attitudes, I think you said. Mr. Filch, I mean. Uh, what does that mean, really?"

The Headmaster looked sad for a moment. "It means that he has taken the unforgivable step of attacking a student without sufficient provocation, such as it being in self-defence. He is having a chance to speak with some Healers from St. Mungos that I happen to trust, and he will attempt to work through his issues over the upcoming year away from Hogwarts. If he is unable to, then I am afraid that we will be forced to terminate his employment at the end of the year, if only for his own safety." Harry cocked his head in puzzlement, which

drew laughter from the Headmaster. “Professors Lupin, Black, Pettigrew and Evans have all threatened physical injury upon the man. Your own Head of House is less than pleased with him, and the Defence professor has stated that he will join with his friends to ... ah ... 'visit Hell-fire upon his head if we have to' were his words, I believe. This does not take into account some of the rumblings of the student body. Oliver Wood was making some intriguing plans concerning Quidditch gear that I chose not to stay and listen to, quite possibly saving my own life,” Dumbledore finished, his eyes twinkling merrily at the end.

Harry was back on his feet the next day, although for a moment he thought that he might need Madam Pomfrey from the way that the girls in the dormitories greeted him. He found himself almost literally tackled by Ginny, Alicia, Angelina, Katie, and Hermione, Ginny being almost incoherent in her tears. The others from the Quidditch team, plus Harry's room-mates, settled for slaps on the back and simple welcome homes.

“We're working on something to get Filch back, though,” growled Fred.

“Talk to some of the professors, “ Harry answered.

“Are you crazy?” George sputtered. “Let teachers know we're going to prank someone?”

“Specifically, I'd recommend talking to the teachers of the following classes,” Harry answered with a grin. “Charms; Potions, up to O.W.L. level, that is; Muggle Studies; History of Magic; and possibly even Defence. I have reason to believe that the Transfiguration professor might look the other way if the pranks weren't too destructive, and aimed only at the person specifically.” His grin widened. “And it's probably safe to assume that the Headmaster might also ignore it as well, considering he's the one who told me the stuff I just told you.” He paused. “Of course, that assumes that Mr. Filch is still the same when he gets back from St. Mungos.” This raised eyebrows around the common room.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said, “what were you going on about when we were running after you? You heard something?”

“Yeah. We've got a very large snake in the walls here. *Very large*. That's what I realised that I had heard when I thought about it. Something hungry was speaking parseltongue.”

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Harry noticed shortly after the incident on Halloween that the other three houses seemed to be giving him more space in the hallways. Unless it were a Gryffindor, no one seemed to want to get too close to him. His only response was to say, “Malfoy's probably telling tales, and they're stupid enough to believe them.”

The attack had also had an effect on Hermione. It was quite usual for Hermione to spend a lot of time reading, but she was now doing almost nothing else. Nor could Harry and Ron get much response from her when they asked what she was up to, and not until the following Wednesday did they find out.

Harry had been running late after talking to Uncle Peter. He would actually talk to the teachers differently, depending on whether it was school related or not, and he had impressed the other teachers by being able to keep his outside association with so many of the professors on a strictly student/teacher level in public, unless one of them approached him as an Uncle. (Or mother, in Lily's case.)

He headed toward the library to meet up with Hermione and Ron, and saw Justin Finch-Fletchley coming toward him. Justin was a Muggle-born in his own year, in Hufflepuff, and Harry admitted that he didn't know him very well. Just as Harry was about to say hello, Justin caught sight of him and turned, speeding off in the opposite direction. Harry simply rolled his eyes and headed into the library, where he found Ron trying to finish an essay for History of Magic. More precisely, he was trying to find a good place to stop, since Sirius seemed to have a particular gift for teaching and catching the interest of the students. It was the only class that Ron actually tended to surpass Hermione in essay length.

Hermione had her head buried in a very thick book, with someone nearby scowling at her. “Come on, Granger,” Ernie MacMillan complained, “let someone else have a crack at the book for a while.”

"Well, either buy your own copy, as I did, or find someone who will let you have the book when they have finished with it." Ernie huffed off, turning slightly white as he caught sight of Harry and speeding away to another area of the library.

"What's up, Hermione?" he asked with a lop-sided grin.

She started, and then smiled at him. "I've been searching for references to the Chamber," she said. "I found some information on it."

The rustling sound of at least thirty students trying to get close enough to hear was enough to make Harry snort his amusement. "Shall we take it somewhere else?" he asked. "You've done the research – no sense in giving it to all these people for free, especially when they're hoping to use it against me." A quiet rumble of discontent sped through Madam Pince's demesnes.

It was back in the common room of Gryffindor Tower that she explained. "You know how the Founders are said to have built this castle to teach magic over a thousand years ago. No one knows exactly when. The four school Houses are even named after them: Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin."

"For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out people like us who showed signs of magic and bringing them to the castle to be educated. But then they started to disagree. A rift began to grow between Slytherin and the others. Slytherin wanted to be 'more selective' about the students admitted to Hogwarts. He believed that magical learning should be kept within pure-blood families. He disliked taking students of Muggle parentage, believing us to be untrustworthy. After a while, there was a serious argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school."

She sat back into the couch, and scowled, looking for all the world as if she were a younger Professor McGonagall for just a moment. "Reliable historical sources tell us this much," she said. "But there is also the legend of the Chamber of Secrets. The story is that Slytherin

had built a hidden chamber in the castle, of which the other founders knew nothing.

"According to the legend, Slytherin sealed the Chamber of Secrets so that none would be able to open it until his own true heir arrived at the school. The heir alone would be able to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the horror within, and use it to purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic."

"Anything in your reading as to what the 'horror within' is?" Ron asked.

"None whatsoever," Hermione said. She giggled once. "Did you see the look on MacMillan's face when I wouldn't give him my personal copy of 'Hogwarts: A History'?"

"Git deserves to be let down," Ron muttered. "Did you see the way he reacted to Harry being in the library?"

"Yes," she replied darkly.

"Let's not forget Justin," Harry added. "Twit saw me coming toward the library and took off in the other direction as if Fluffy were chasing him."

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The mystery of who the Heir was that the message referred to was a big topic around the school, with the front runner being Harry in the students speculations. Harry, in turn, began to design pranks to play on the rest of the school. "Harry, they'll hate you even more if they ever find out!" Hermione said in worry when she found out.

"Well then, I'll just need the help of the smartest witch in our year to help keep me undiscovered then, won't I? When my map is done it'll be a lot easier, but until then ..." he said with a short pause.

"What map?" Ron asked.

He noticed George and Fred inching closer as they heard him talk about a map, so he said, "I'll tell you later, when the guys with the extendible ears aren't listening in."

The two pranksters slid into seats near them. "You caught our attention, oh semi-brother-like-creature ours, by referring to a map that is supposed to help you out at this school. We came across something like that in our first year, during some ... ah, quality time, shall we say, with our esteemed caretaker." They looked around the room and saw that they were the only ones around, so they pulled out an old piece of parchment.

Harry looked at it and chuckled to himself as Ron said, "What? An old dirty parchment?"

"Ah but this isn't just any 'old dirty parchment', Ronnie-kins," Fred said.

"This is the secret to our success," George said. "It's how we get places."

"It was designed by pranksters, for pranksters," Fred finished.

Harry closed his eyes, thinking. He wanted to keep the secret of who the Marauders were from Fred and George for as long as he could, just to see how long it would take them to figure it out. "Wait a second. Designed by pranksters. It's just parchment right now. That means that there's a password to the thing."

"You're good, Harry, but you'll never suss out the password," George said with a proud grin.

"Mind if I try before I give up and ask you guys?" They grinned and pushed it toward him.

Pulling his wand, he pointed it at the page and said, "Show your secrets," in a quiet voice. Writing gently scrolled across the page.

Mr. Prongs requests that the individual asking be polite about it.

Mr. Padfoot agrees, and wonders how the person holding this map came upon it.

Mr. Moony and Mr. Wormtail agree with Mr. Padfoot's second comment.

“Some prankster friends of mine have the map and are showing it to me, and I'm trying to figure out the password.”

Mr. Prongs wonders if you are a prankster yourself.

“Not yet, but I appreciate a good one. More importantly, I see no reason to let others, such as professors, know about the existence of this map. In other words – Map? What map?”

Mr. Padfoot has decided that he already likes the questioner.

Mr. Prongs, Mr. Moony and Mr. Wormtail concur.

“Thank you. If I ask a few questions politely, will you answer them truthfully?” The map was 'silent' for a second or two.

Mr. Moony, Mr. Wormtail, Mr. Padfoot and Mr. Prongs find that to be a sneaky and underhanded question, showing no trust whatsoever in the veracity expected. In other words, someone with the proper mind of a prankster. We so swear.

“Bloody hell, Harry!” Fred whispered. “It took us a week to get that far!”

Harry just laughed. “You have a password. Does it involve pranking?”

Mr. Prongs feels it best to answer simply for the moment. Yes and no.

Mr. Padfoot is quick to add that Mr. Prongs has given an honest answer.

Mr. Moony is quick to suggest a different phrasing.

“Does the password involve the word 'prank' in any of its tenses?”

No.

“How about a synonym for pranking?”

Yes.

“Caper?”

No.

“Joke?”

No.

“Trick?”

No.

“Mischief?”

Yes and no.

“Yes and no? Is there more than one password?”

Yes.

“Cool.” He pretended to think for a moment. “Let me guess. One password to activate and another to shut it down.”

Mr. Moony is quite impressed with your mental capabilities.

“Mischief is used in one of the passwords, then.”

Yes.

He pointed his wand at the map. “I swear to do some mischief.” It flickered for a moment.

Mr. Padfoot recalls a phrasing he heard once – So close, yet so far.

“I solemnly swear to do some mischief.”

Mr. Moony reiterates that you are on the right track, but might wish to wait until you are finished with a prank to admit that you have managed such mischief.

“Mr. Evans thanks you,” Harry said with his trademark lopsided grin. He looked up to see Fred and George staring at him, wide-eyed. “Sorry, getting into the speech pattern.”

"How are you doing that? We're not stupid, but we didn't get this far this early!" Fred said.

"You tend to bash away at something," Harry said. "I'm paying attention to the 'speech patterns', if you want, of the personalities of the map. 'Open up' or 'show me' isn't going to work with this map. Something like 'I solemnly swear to use this map for purposes of mischief' is far more likely."

Mr. Wormtail is quite impressed with Mr. Evans intellectual gifts and wonders if he is a Ravenclaw?

"No, Gryffindor, like my mother." He winced for a moment, internally, realising that he should not have said that.

Gryffindor is proud to have such a brilliant mind, Mr. Moony believes. Mr. Moony also wishes to tell Mr. Evans that he should definitely keep the 'I solemnly swear' part.

"Thank you. Is the entire phrasing formal?"

No.

"Hmm. I solemnly swear to ... hmm ... to get up to no good. Nah, that wouldn't work."

Mr. Prongs thinks that you have gotten close enough.

Mr. Moony concurs.

Mr. Padfoot agrees as well.

Mr. Wormtail is pleased to know that Mr. Evans is so very intelligent.

With that, the phrase 'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good' wrote itself across the page for a moment. Harry repeated it, and the map of the school drew itself onto the sheet.

"What made you think of 'up to no good'?" Hermione asked.

"I was trying to remember what Aunt Molly always says about these two," he replied, jabbing a thumb in their general direction. "Most of

the words that mean prank I'd already eliminated, so I was searching for something, and that just sort of came out.” He thought for a moment. “You're aware that we can use this to help find out who is the Heir – or at least help exclude people. Maybe even go listen to the self-proclaimed Slytherin Prince in his own common room.”

“How will you manage that?” Ron asked.

“Look here,” he said, pointing at himself on the map. “And look at the portrait hole.” On the map, the entrance had a small word balloon that read 'Justitia Omnibus'. He slid his finger along until he was at the Hufflepuff entrance, where there was a balloon that read 'Labor Omnia Vincit'.

“It prints the passwords to the various places,” he said. “I realised that the second I saw our password printed here.” He frowned. “Our problem would be getting into the Slytherin common room and out again without suspicion.”

Hermione grimaced. “I can think of one way, but it breaks about fifty rules or more.” When the four males looked at her, she said in a small voice, “Polyjuice potion.”

Fred and George looked at her in shock before dropping to their knees before her and saying in unison, “Marry me!” They looked at each other for a long moment, nodded, and then said, again in unison, “Correction: marry US!”

Hermione's eyes went wide, she blushed furiously, and she bolted from the couch to run upstairs to the girls dormitory.

“Mental,” Ron muttered. “The girl's completely mental.”

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“The Seer thinks years. I think decades.”

“You are aware that there is a reason that you are not considered a Seer?”

“Yes, I know. We must await the Carpenter and the Key.”

"The Carpenter walks among us. The Key is not yet, but soon will be, and then she will have walked among us."

After a long pause - "Seer lessons much?"

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Harry woke early on Saturday morning and lay for a while thinking about the coming Quidditch match. He was nervous, mainly at the thought of what Wood would say if Gryffindor lost, but also at the idea of facing a team mounted on the fastest racing brooms gold could buy. He had never wanted to beat Slytherin so badly. After half an hour of lying there with his insides churning, he got up, dressed, and went down to breakfast early, where he found the rest of the Gryffindor team huddled at the long, empty table, all looking uptight and not speaking much. As much as they loved the game, actual game day made them nervous.

As eleven o'clock approached, the whole school started to make its way down to the Quidditch stadium. It was a muggy sort of day with a hint of thunder in the air. Ron and Hermione came hurrying over to wish Harry good luck as he entered the locker rooms. The team pulled on their scarlet Gryffindor robes, then sat down to listen to Wood's usual pre-match pep talk.

"Slytherin has better brooms than us," he began. "No point denying it. But we've got better people on our brooms. We've trained harder than they have, we've been flying in all weather -" ("Too true," muttered George Weasley. "I haven't been completely dry since August") "- and we're going to make them rue the day they let that little bit of slime, Malfoy, buy his way onto their team."

Chest heaving with emotion, Wood turned to Harry. "It'll be down to you, Harry, to show them that a Seeker has to have something more than a rich father. Get to that Snitch before Malfoy or die trying, Harry, because we've got to win today, we've got to."

"So no pressure, Harry" said Fred, winking at him. Harry stifled a small snort of laughter.

As they walked out onto the pitch, a roar of noise greeted them; mainly cheers, because Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were anxious to see Slytherin beaten, but the Slytherins in the crowd made their boos and hisses heard, too. Madam Hooch, the Quidditch teacher, asked Flint and Wood to shake hands, which they did, giving each other threatening stares and gripping rather harder than was necessary.

"On my whistle," said Madam Hooch. "Three ... two ... one ..."

With a roar from the crowd to speed them upward, the fourteen players rose toward the ugly grey sky. Harry flew higher than any of them, squinting around for the Snitch.

"All right there, Scarhead?" yelled Malfoy, shooting underneath him as though to show off the speed of his broom.

Even if he had wanted to reply, Harry had no chance to, as one of the Bludgers sped toward him. He sped out of the way, only to find it turning about to come after him again. He flew madly to the laughter of Malfoy, making him wonder if perhaps the blonde had done something.

The whistle was blown as soon as it became obvious that the Bludger was hunting Harry. Both teams landed, excepting Harry, who was still running from the mad Bludger, doing loops and whirls of amazing grace as he avoided it. He suddenly dove straight down at the ground, moving at top speed and hugging his broom tightly to increase his speed. Just when it was thought that no one could save his life, he turned, so close to the ground that his knees dug twin furrows in the mud. The Bludger, on the other hand, was unable to turn quite so easily and ploughed deeply into the ground, spraying dirt everywhere. He flew to the two teams and landed beside them. "I think we can tell that it was chasing me," he breathed before leaning down and brushing off his knees.

Hooch looked to Professors Evans, Potter, Snape and Dumbledore, all of whom agreed that the other Bludger was fine and untouched. The other Bludger was carefully excavated and quickly checked over to very puzzled looks. "This one isn't charmed or cursed either," Lily Evans said. "What the dickens is going on?"

"Language, Lil," James Potter chuckled. "Can we trust that these Bludgers won't do this again?"

"Not like it was aiming for anyone important," Flint grumbled.

"Careful, Flint," warned Professor Evans. "You wouldn't want me to treat you the way that Professor Snape treats all the Gryffindor students, would you?"

"Evans," growled Snape, but she cut him off.

"Shut it, Professor. The records can be checked. I do not treat my son preferentially – if anything, I am a little harsher on him than other students. Can the same be said for your teaching? You protect your Slytherins admirably, as if they were your own children. Well, one of your 'children' has stated in my hearing that he felt that my actual son being injured or killed by a rogue Bludger was of no import. I will protect my son with the same fervour that you protect your students. And you'll note that I have not actually punished him, merely warned him." Snape wisely decided to say nothing further on the matter.

The game quickly got under way again, with the sky finally deciding to open up in an attempt to be part of the game. The visibility dropped horribly, but Harry continued to scan the skies. There was no longer a Bludger aiming directly for him no matter what, but he did note that the ones that came near were closer than he was used to.

He had been flying for what felt like an hour in the driving rain when he caught a glint of gold. It was flying close enough to Malfoy's right ear that Harry was surprised that the Slytherin hadn't at least swatted at the annoying noise next to his head. He continued his circling, gliding closer to Malfoy all the time. To Harry's immense surprise, it still had not moved by the time he was close enough, so his hand shot out past Malfoy's face and grabbed the now struggling Snitch. Malfoy was startled by this and lashed out at Harry, managing to club him hard on the ear, stunning Harry enough that he barely kept to his broom. He began to slowly float to the ground, blinking as he dropped. *Never drop your guard around Malfoy*, he reminded himself. He reached the ground and was helped by the rest of the team, who chose to deliver him to Madam Pomfrey on their shoulders. He left to the tune of Flint chewing strips off Malfoy for missing something flying

close enough to him that he should have heard it whispering in his ear.

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He was, as he considered it, *sentenced* to spend the night in the hospital wing, despite his assurances that he was fine. Madam Pomfrey wouldn't even release him to his own mother's care, which had held the possibility of an interesting row between the two women before Dumbledore was forced to step in and point out that Poppy Pomfrey was better equipped to deal with concussions and the like than Lily was.

He had managed to get to sleep, but was awakened suddenly by the feel of someone sponging his forehead. He opened his eyes to see two tennis-ball sized ones staring at him. It was a house elf, one of the floppy eared folk who cleaned the houses and even worked here at Hogwarts, doing the cooking and cleaning around the castle. "Who are you?" Harry asked.

"I is Dobby," the squeaky voice answered. "Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter sir. Dobby is trying to keep Harry Potter safe. Dobby was unable to keep Harry Potter from the train, and was unable to send Harry Potter home with the Bludger."

"Dobby, you are aware that the Bludger could have killed me?" he asked dangerously. "That sending me home might well have been in a pine box?" He gritted his teeth as he realised one other thing. "The name is Evans, Dobby. Harry Evans."

"Oh no, sir, Dobby could never go *that* far. No mere Bludger could kill the great Harry Potter ... Evans!" He twisted an ear to punish himself for using the last name of Potter.

"Don't believe the hype, Dobby. I'm just as able to be killed as the next boy hit repeatedly with a large iron ball moving fast enough to punch through wood." Dobby's response was to open his eyes even wider – Harry was afraid that they might literally fall from his head – and grab his ears and begin to twist them even more painfully. Even Harry winced at the sight. "Stop it!" he said.

"But Dobby has done wrong – Dobby must punish himself!" He hit his head once against the table before Harry put his hand in the way to stop him. The elf looked at him, a tear rolling from his eye and down his large nose.

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you wanted me sent home in pieces?" Harry asked, trying to change the subject slightly.

"Ah, if Harry Potter ... Evans only knew!" Dobby groaned, more tears dripping onto his ragged pillowcase. "If he knew what he means to us, to the lowly, the enslaved, we dregs of the magical world! Dobby remembers how it was when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was at the height of his powers, sir! We house-elves were treated like vermin, sir! Of course, Dobby is still treated like that, sir," he admitted, drying his face on the pillowcase. "But mostly, sir, life has improved for my kind since you triumphed over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter ... Evans survived, and the Dark Lord's power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Harry Potter ... Evans shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the Dark days would never end, sir ... and now, at Hogwarts, terrible things are to happen, are perhaps happening already, and Dobby cannot let Harry Potter ... Evans stay here now that history is to repeat itself, now that the Chamber of Secrets is open once more ..." He hit himself in the head once every time the name 'Potter' escaped his lips.

Dobby froze, horror-struck, then grabbed Harry's water jug from his bedside table and cracked it over his own head, toppling out of sight. A second later, he crawled back onto the bed, cross-eyed, muttering, "Bad Dobby, very bad Dobby ..."

"So there is a Chamber of Secrets?" Harry whispered. "And did you say it's been opened before? Tell me, Dobby!"

He seized the elf's bony wrist as Dobby's hand inched toward the water jug. "But I'm not Muggle-born. How can I be in danger from the Chamber?"

"Ah, sir, ask no more, ask no more of poor Dobby," stammered the elf, his eyes huge in the dark. "Dark deeds are planned in this place, but Harry Evans must not be here when they happen – go home, Harry

Potter, go home. Harry Potter ... Evans must not meddle in this, sir, 'tis too dangerous -"

"Who is it, Dobby?" Harry said, keeping a firm hold on Dobby's wrist to stop him from hitting himself with the water jug again. "Who's opened it? Who opened it last time?"

"Dobby can't, sir, Dobby can't, Dobby mustn't tell!" squealed the elf. "Go home, Harry Potter, go home!"

"I'm not going anywhere!" said Harry fiercely. "One of my best friends is Muggle-born; she'll be first in line if the Chamber really has been opened -"

"Harry Potter ... Evans risks his own life for his friends!" moaned Dobby in a kind of miserable ecstasy. "So noble! So valiant! But he must save himself, he must, Harry Potter must not -"

Dobby suddenly froze, his bat ears quivering. Harry heard it, too. There were footsteps coming down the passageway outside.

"Dobby must go!" breathed the elf, terrified. There was a loud crack, and Harry's fist was suddenly clenched on thin air. He slumped back into bed, his eyes on the dark doorway to the hospital wing as the footsteps drew nearer.

"I'm not leaving all these people to die," Harry murmured to himself before the people entered. The next moment, Dumbledore was backing into the dormitory, wearing a long woolly dressing gown and a nightcap. He was carrying one end of what looked like a statue. Professor McGonagall appeared a second later, carrying its feet. Together, they heaved it onto a bed.

"Get Madam Pomfrey," whispered Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall hurried past the end of Harry's bed out of sight. Harry lay quite still, pretending to be asleep. He heard urgent voices, and then Professor McGonagall swept back into view, closely followed by Madam Pomfrey, who was pulling a cardigan on over her nightdress. He heard a sharp intake of breath.

"What happened?" Madam Pomfrey whispered to Dumbledore, bending over the statue on the bed.

"Another attack," said Dumbledore. "Minerva found him on the stairs."

"There was a bunch of grapes next to him," said Professor McGonagall. "We think he was trying to sneak up here to visit Evans."

Harry's stomach gave a horrible lurch. Slowly and carefully, he raised himself a few inches so he could look at the statue on the bed. A ray of moonlight lay across its staring face. It was Colin Creevey. His eyes were wide and his hands were stuck up in front of him, holding his camera.

"Petrified?" whispered Madam Pomfrey.

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "But I shudder to think...If Albus hadn't been on the way downstairs for hot chocolate - who knows what might have -"

The three of them stared down at Colin. Then Dumbledore leaned forward and wrenched the camera out of Colin's rigid grip.

"You don't think he managed to get a picture of his attacker?" said Professor McGonagall eagerly.

Dumbledore didn't answer. He opened the back of the camera.

"Gracious!" said Madam Pomfrey.

A jet of steam had hissed out of the camera. Harry, three beds away, caught the acrid smell of burnt plastic.

"Melted," said Madam Pomfrey wonderingly. "All melted ..."

"What does this mean, Albus?" Professor McGonagall asked urgently.

"It means," said Dumbledore, "that the Chamber of Secrets is indeed open again."

Madam Pomfrey clapped a hand to her mouth. Professor McGonagall stared at Dumbledore.

"But, Albus ... surely ... who?"

"The question is not who," said Dumbledore, his eyes on Colin. "The question is how."

And from what Harry could see of Professor McGonagall's shadowy face, she didn't understand this any better than he did.

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He was released the next day with a clean bill of health, and the school year continued as expected – with rumours and suspicion rife throughout the castle. There were the standard thoughts that Harry was the one doing it, and bringing logic into the situation by pointing out that he had been in the hospital wing when the Colin Creevey incident happened only got fist-fights started between the Gryffindors and the other Houses.

Harry came laughing into the room one day as Ron and Hermione were plotting how to go about making the Polyjuice potion that they needed – especially the process of obtaining the boomslang skin and bicorn horn. They explained how difficult it was going to be, and had begun plotting how they were going to obtain it when Harry shushed them. "It should be ready in a month, Hermione."

She glared at him. "And where are you brewing it?" she asked hotly. "Are you sure you're doing it correctly?"

"In the Potions lab, for extra credit, so we will be doing it properly." At their puzzled looks, Harry laughed. "Come with me. I'll explain everything shortly."

He led them down to the Potions laboratory – the secondary one used by Professor Pettigrew. He knocked on the door and stepped inside. "I've brought them, Uncle Peter."

"Excellent, Harry!" the small exuberant professor said. "You're sure that they can be trusted?"

"The cute one was the one who suggested Polyjuice." Hermione's eyes went wide at Harry's flirting statement.

"I did no such thing!" replied a laughing Ron. "It was her!"

"Like I said – the cute one," Harry said to his 'uncle' in a deadpan voice. The four of them chuckled a bit.

"Explain to me why you need it," Peter said, sitting down.

"Hermione, if you would?" Harry said. "You're a bit more eloquent than I am."

"I am not, Harry," she said with a blush.

"Yes you are. Please tell him?"

She nodded. "Okay. Well, Professor ..."

"... Peter," Pettigrew interrupted. "When we're in private like this, and it's not a school function, I give you permission to call me by my Christian name."

"I couldn't do that!" she replied, scandalised. "You're my professor!"

"He's sort of adopting you, Hermione," Harry said with a smile. "He likes you enough already that he's willing to treat you like he treats me. He's no real relation of mine, but unlike Potter, he accepts me as family. He's offering the same to you."

Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked at him hopefully, which he answered with a smiling nod. "In private, obviously. I'm trying to keep some semblance of order with the rest of the students."

"Yes, sir ... I mean Peter ... can I call you Uncle as well? I think that would be easier on me." At his nod, she tried to continue. "Um, where was I? Oh yes. The whole Chamber of Secrets scenario. We believe that Malfoy knows more than he's letting on. There's only one way I could think of to get the information, and that's to ask him. Problem is, he needs to be unaware that it's us doing the asking. That's where the Polyjuice potion comes in. If we make that, we can pretend to be Slytherins and ask him about it."

“Seems like a good idea to me. I know that Harry wouldn't let this go, and Ron's never been one to let a friend down in his time of need. They wouldn't have chosen you as their friend if you weren't the same.” He reached over and pulled her into a hug, surprising her. “Welcome to the family.”

It was at that moment that Sirius and Remus came through the door. “Oy, Wo ... Peter!” Sirius said as the door closed. “Going after the birds a little young, aren't you?”

Hermione blushed furiously and tried to pull away, but Peter wouldn't let go. “You'll need to get used to it, Hermione,” he said. “If you're part of this big happy family, you'll need to get used to the teasing.”

“Family?” Remus asked, intrigued.

“Yes, Uncle Moony,” Harry said. “They know, by the way. We're keeping it from the twins for as long as we can – sort of the longest running prank I can come up with. I decided to drop the one I was going to play on Hermione.”

She looked at him dangerously. “Which was ...” she asked, voice promising pain untold.

“I was going to try to convince you that Professor Murray left because Snape was a vampire and she was a half-vampire. I know that you recognised the name, and I'm pretty sure that she's old enough for Bram Stoker to have known her, or at least have heard her name.” He looked at her, slightly worried. “Forgive me?”

“I'll think about it,” she said with a voice that told him that he already was forgiven.

He looked relieved, and the trio of adults shared a look. “Anyway,” Harry said, missing the look, “these two know the legend of the Marauders and that currently all four of them are teaching at the school. I'm making my own map at the moment, given what you guys told me and taught me. I'm going to be adding in the extras that you thought of over the years. Maybe we can make this a tool that ... you guys will hate me for this ... maybe even a headmaster might find it useful.”

Sirius melodramatically put his hand over his heart. "Say it isn't so! Tell me that he's not growing up to be ..." he shuddered theatrically, "... respectable!"

Ron snorted. "The 'Slytherin Prince'?" he asked, making his ridicule of the title extremely evident. "Right, and I'm really the Quidditch captain – I just let Wood do all my work for me."

"Do you agree with me, Uncle Peter?" Harry asked, turning back to the Potions teacher. "That we need to figure this out?"

"Well, the first thing that we're going to need for you three is pewter cauldrons," was the reply. "You'll then need -"

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The Deputy Headmistress came around with the sign-up sheet for those choosing to stay for the Christmas break. All three of the Trio signed up, especially noticing that Malfoy had signed up to stay as well. Their potions were coming along swimmingly, and they would definitely be ready in time for them to use it over the break.

Harry had noticed during the past weeks that Justin Finch-Fletchley had been making a concerted effort to avoid him. He decided to look for him to see if he could get an explanation. Justin was a hard worker, so he decided to check the library first, since he was often found studying when not in classes. Justin might not have been the absolute brightest of students, but he was certainly a credit to his house.

A group of the Hufflepuffs who should have been in Herbology were sitting at the back of the library, but they didn't seem to be working. Between the long lines of high bookshelves, Harry could see that their heads were close together and they were having what looked like an absorbing conversation. He couldn't see whether Justin was among them. He was walking toward them when something of what they were saying met his ears, and he paused to listen, hidden in the Invisibility section.

"So anyway," a stout boy was saying, "I told Justin to hide up in our dormitory. I mean to say, if Evans marked him down as his next

victim, it's best if he keeps a low profile for a while. Of course, Justin's been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Evans he was Muggle-born. Justin actually told him he'd been down for Eton. That's not the kind of thing you bandy about with Slytherin's heir on the loose, is it?"

"You definitely think it is Evans, then, Ernie?" said a girl with blonde pigtails anxiously.

"Hannah," said the stout boy solemnly, "he's a Parselmouth. Everyone knows that's the mark of a Dark wizard. Have you ever heard of a decent one who could talk to snakes? They called Slytherin himself Serpent-tongue."

There was some heavy murmuring at this, and Ernie went on, "Remember what was written on the wall? Enemies of the Heir, Beware. Evans has never liked Filch. Filch's cat was attacked. That first year, Creevey, was annoying him, taking all those pictures. Next thing we know – Creevey's been attacked."

"He always seems so nice, though," said Hannah uncertainly, "and, well, he's the one who made You-Know-Who disappear. He can't be all bad, can he?"

Ernie lowered his voice mysteriously, the Hufflepuffs bent closer, and Harry edged nearer so that he could catch Ernie's words.

"No one knows how he survived that attack by You-Know-Who. I mean to say, he was only a baby when it happened. He should have been blasted into smithereens. Only a really powerful Dark wizard could have survived a curse like that." He dropped his voice until it was barely more than a whisper, and said, "That's probably why You-Know-Who wanted to kill him in the first place. Didn't want another Dark Lord competing with him. I wonder what other powers Evans has been hiding?"

Harry couldn't take any longer. Clearing his throat loudly, he stepped out from behind the bookshelves. If he hadn't been feeling so angry, he would have found the sight that greeted him funny: Every one of the Hufflepuffs looked as though they had been Petrified by the sight of him, and the colour was draining out of Ernie's face.

"Hello," said Harry. "I *had* been looking for Justin Finch-Fletchley."

The Hufflepuffs' worst fears had clearly been confirmed. They all looked fearfully at Ernie. "What do you want with him?" said Ernie in a quavering voice.

"Well, it's useless now, since I can see where it's coming from, but I'd wanted to see why he'd been hiding from me. You've forgotten last year. Besides, you seem too stupid to remember that I'm a target as well, MacMillan. I'm not a pure-blood. My mum is a Muggleborn. So I'm in just as much danger from the idiot opening the Chamber."

"You lie! You're the Heir, so you're in no danger at all!" Ernie MacMillan hissed at him. "You just want to kill us all!" The others nodded, fear etched on their faces.

Harry shook his head. "To hell with you. Your House is even worse than Malfoy's, and that's saying something. I'm leaving, and I'll unfortunately see you all later." He stalked from the room, earning a warning glare from Madam Pince. "Oh, stuff it," he growled at her, making actually step backward in shock.

Harry blundered up the corridor, barely noticing where he was going, he was in such a fury. Harry stamped up the stairs and turned along another corridor, which was particularly dark; the torches had been extinguished by a strong, icy draft that was blowing through a loose windowpane. He was halfway down the passage when he tripped headlong over something lying on the floor. He turned to squint at what he'd fallen over and felt the icy hand of fear grip his heart.

Justin Finch-Fletchley was lying on the floor, rigid and cold, a look of shock frozen on his face, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. And that wasn't all. Next to him was another figure, the strangest sight Harry had ever seen.

It was Nearly Headless Nick, no longer pearly-white and transparent, but black and smoky, floating immobile and horizontal, six inches off the floor. His head was half off and his face wore an expression of shock identical to Justin's.

Harry clambered to his feet and ran to a classroom, slamming the door open and surprising the class inside. "There's been another attack! It's Justin Finch-Fletchley and Nearly Headless Nick! Help!"

His yell echoed down the corridor, and doors flew open, people flooding out of them. For several long minutes, there was a scene of such incredible confusion that Justin was in danger of being squashed and people kept standing in Nearly Headless Nick. Harry found himself pinned against the wall as the teachers shouted for quiet. Professor McGonagall came running, followed by her own class, one of whom still had black-and-white-striped hair. She used her wand to set off a loud bang, which restored silence, and ordered everyone back into their classes. No sooner had the scene cleared somewhat than Ernie Macmillan arrived, panting, on the scene.

"Caught in the act!" Ernie yelled, his face stark white, pointing his finger dramatically at Harry.

"That will do, Macmillan!" said Professor McGonagall sharply.

Peeves was bobbing overhead, having just arrived with the noise; Peeves always loved chaos. As the teachers bent over Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, examining them, Peeves broke into song:

"Oh, Potter, you rotter, oh, what have you done,

You're killing off students, you think it's good fun -- "

"That's enough Peeves!" barked Professor McGonagall, and Peeves zoomed away backward, with his tongue out at Harry.

Justin was carried up to the hospital wing by Professor Flitwick and Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department, but nobody seemed to know what to do for Nearly Headless Nick. In the end, Professor McGonagall conjured a large fan out of thin air, which she gave to Ernie with instructions to waft Nearly Headless Nick up the stairs. Ernie took to the job quite seriously, fanning Nick along like a silent black hovercraft. This left Harry and Professor McGonagall alone together.

"Follow me, Evans," she said.

"Professor," said Harry at once, "I swear I didn't -"

"This is out of my hands, Evans," said Professor McGonagall curtly.

They marched in silence around a corner and she stopped before a large and extremely ugly stone gargoyle. "Lemon drop!" McGonagall said. This was evidently a password, because the gargoyle sprang suddenly to life and hopped aside as the wall behind him split in two. Even full of dread for what was coming, Harry couldn't fail to be amazed. Behind the wall was a spiral staircase that was moving smoothly upward, like an escalator. As he and Professor McGonagall stepped onto it, Harry heard the wall close behind them with what he considered to be an ominous thud. They rose upward in circles, higher and higher, until at last, slightly dizzy, Harry saw a gleaming oak door ahead, with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin. They stepped off the stone staircase at the top, and Professor McGonagall rapped on the door. It opened silently and they entered. Professor McGonagall told Harry to wait and left him there, alone.

"They're going to use this to expel me, I can just tell. I've been there when two of them were found. And I know that they've twisted it so that I was able to send whatever it is after Colin." He paced back and forth in the room.

It was a large and beautiful circular room, full of funny little noises. A number of curious silver instruments stood on spindle-legged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke. The walls were covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames. There was also an enormous, claw-footed desk, and, sitting on a shelf behind it, a shabby, tattered wizard's hat – the Sorting Hat.

A strange, gagging noise behind him made him wheel around – he wasn't alone after all. Standing on a golden perch behind the door was a decrepit-looking bird that resembled a half-plucked turkey. Harry stared at it and the bird looked mournfully back, making the gagging noise again. Harry thought it looked very ill. Its eyes were dull and, even as Harry watched, a couple more feathers fell out of its tail.

Harry was just thinking that all he needed was for Dumbledore's pet bird to die while he was alone in the office with it, when the bird burst into flames. He yelled in shock and backed away into the desk. He looked feverishly around in case there was a glass of water somewhere but couldn't see one; the bird, meanwhile, had become a fireball; it gave one loud shriek and next second there was nothing but a smouldering pile of ash on the floor. Of course, this is when the door opened. Dumbledore came in, looking very sombre.

"Professor," Harry gasped. "Your bird – I couldn't do anything – he just caught fire -"

To Harry's astonishment, Dumbledore smiled.

"It's quite about time, too," he said. "He's been looking dreadful for days; I've been telling him to get a move on."

He chuckled at the stunned look on Harry's face.

"Fawkes is a phoenix, Harry. Phoenixes burst into flame when it is time for them to die and are reborn from the ashes. Watch him..."

Harry looked down in time to see a tiny, wrinkled, newborn bird poke its head out of the ashes. It was quite as ugly as the old one.

"It's a shame you had to see him on a Burning Day," said Dumbledore, seating himself behind his desk. "He's really very handsome most of the time, wonderful red and gold plumage. Fascinating creatures, phoenixes. They can carry immensely heavy loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly faithful pets."

In the shock of Fawkes catching fire, Harry had forgotten what he was there for, but it all came back to him as Dumbledore settled himself in the high chair behind the desk and fixed Harry with his penetrating, light-blue stare.

"Can I assume that I am here until my mother can arrive and be told?"

"Yes, Lily is on her way here, but why are you so sad, Harry? I did not think that you knew Mr. Finch-Fletchley that well."

"I didn't, but I'm expecting that he'll be the reason that I'm expelled finally."

"Why would you be expelled for something that you did not do, Mr. Evans?"

Harry relaxed visibly, but then tensed again. "Because as much as you believe me, you've got kids writing home talking about how the Bastard-Who-Lived is also the Heir of Slytherin and that he's going to open the Chamber again."

Dumbledore smiled. "I somehow thought that you might not be completely asleep that night in the infirmary. Be that as it may be, I will fight to keep a student in the school when there is no proof of any complicity in the events in question."

"It doesn't help that I have a house elf trying like mad to get me expelled in order to save my life," Harry replied. "That's who was controlling the Bludger in that game. And he apparently made an effort to keep me, Ron, and Hermione from ever getting here to the school in the first place, but Hermione was smart enough to figure out how to contact the stationmaster, who managed to chase Dobby away."

"Dobby. I wonder which family he belongs to?" Dumbledore mused.

"A Death Eater one is my guess," Harry said. "Whichever family it is has to be behind this re-opening of the Chamber, but they've got an elf that has a conscience and is doing what he can to stop someone the elves ... sorry, elves ... someone they consider important. Apparently I became a symbol for more than just wizards."

Lily came into the office just then and swept Harry into her arms. "Are you all right, Harry?" she asked, hugging him tightly.

While the average twelve year old boy might have been embarrassed, Harry simply melted into his mother's embrace. He was nervous and had three Houses at Hogwarts looking at him with mistrust again, so having her so easily accept him was bliss for him.

“Still no idea who is behind these attacks?” Lily said. “I'm afraid that I pulled a little bit of a Severus in my class after the students all came back in. The Hufflepuffs were stating that Harry had been caught immediately after trying to kill Mr. Finch-Fletchley. You may wish to check the records of the points sir, and decide whether or not they were fairly taken. I'm afraid that I got a little angry at the 'Puffs. In fact, I formally request that you check over my point removal – I want to be fair.”

“The mere fact that you formally wish them checked is something in your favour, you realise,” Dumbledore said fondly.

“Yes, now that I'm calmer. I was quite angry in class. They happen to be the only class required to give me three feet on the charm we were learning. All the others had only eighteen inches.”

“Perhaps it might teach them to think before speaking,” Dumbledore said with a grin. “I will not change that punishment, and I honestly doubt that I shall reverse your reduction of Hufflepuff's points unless it was highly excessive.”

Harry began to think that the magic in the school had a knack for arranging things, because just then there was a knock at the door, and Professor Pomona Sprout entered. “Albus, I am at my wits end!” she exclaimed. “My Hufflepuffs are ... ooo ... I can't even express how disappointed ... oh, hello Lily. Suddenly, everything they were saying to me makes sense.” Her eyes then fell on Harry. “Mr. Evans. I want you to know that at least the *Head* of Hufflepuff House has not fallen prey to the ridiculous rumours that my ... ooo -” She faded off, obviously not wanting to say bad things about her charges, but unable to find anything good to say at the moment.

“Thank you, ma'am,” Harry said softly. “That means a lot to me.”

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The double attack on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick turned what had hitherto been nervousness into real panic. Curiously, it was Nearly Headless Nick's fate that seemed to worry people most. *What could possibly do that to a ghost?* people asked each other; what terrible power could harm someone who was already dead? There

was almost a stampede to book seats on the Hogwarts Express so that students could go home for Christmas.

This made things easier for the trio as far as dealing with Malfoy and his goons, but as Christmas day proved, they were no closer to the solution of who the Heir of Slytherin was. They had been able to convince Malfoy that they were, in fact, Bulstrode, Goyle and Crabbe, but the most information that they could get was that Lucius Malfoy knew something about the last time that the Chamber had been opened, even though it had been before his time. The three had gone to Professor Pettigrew's classroom, where Ron and Harry had comforted Hermione. She'd held her tongue, but the number of times that Malfoy insulted her and stated his wish for her death had affected her deeply. She had cried herself into a quiet sleep.

Chapter 8

Harry had been awakened the next morning by a shriek very close to his ear, and realised that the three of them had dozed off in the classroom – with Hermione in between himself and Ron. Before he could get very worried, three deep voices laughing and one woman's voice made him look up, to find Remus, Peter, Sirius, and his mother looking at them and laughing.

“You're a fast worker, aren't you, Harry?” Sirius asked. Before anything else could be said, Hermione managed to leap to her feet and run from the room, but not before slapping Harry hard across the cheek. Lily was immediately behind Hermione into the hall.

“What happened?” Harry asked, cradling his stinging cheek. “Last I remember, the three of us came in here to calm Hermione down, because she was crying. It's not easy hearing someone saying that he wishes you were a murder victim. She'd dozed off, and then I awoke to her shrieking in my ear.”

Remus spoke up. “Peter stepped into the room to make sure that the extra doses of Polyjuice were stored properly, and found the three of you sitting on the floor, leaning against each other and some chairs. He called us, and we transfigured some of the chairs into a bed and pillows and put the three of you to bed. The three of you just cuddled right in together.”

“I just hope she'll speak to me again,” Harry said.

“She will, once Lily explains everything to her,” Sirius said. “I think it was the shock of being thirteen and having a boy she's sweet on cuddled up against her.”

Harry looked puzzled and his eyes fell on Ron. “And Ron's sleeping through this whole thing,” he said with a laugh. This time he caught the significant look between the adults. “If I ask you what the look means, you're going to tell me something like 'I'll understand when I'm older', aren't you?” Sirius just grinned, so Harry rolled his eyes. “Well, Sleeping Whatever here should probably be sleeping in his own bed, so let's wake him and get back to Gryffindor Tower.”

Ron was his usual difficult self to awaken, but eventually they got him conscious and Remus led them back to the Fat Lady's portrait. She opened for them without the password, what with a professor guiding them. They stepped inside to see Hermione and Lily sitting on the couch.

Hermione looked up at Harry, and her eyes flickered to his cheek. Pain filled her face. "I'm no better than anyone else, am I? I decided based on too little information, and you took the blame."

He laughed. "Hey, it's easier that way. Everyone else does it, even two of the teachers! You're in good company."

"No I'm not!" she yelled. "Don't you dare say that it's all right that I slapped you! You didn't deserve it, and I'm sorry, for all the good that it really does."

He walked over to her and pulled her into a hug. "It means everything to me, Hermione. You're my friend, and I thought I'd done something in my sleep that made you scream." He was puzzled by the blush that entered her cheeks. "I didn't, did I?"

The blush intensified. "Well, your hand fell on my ... uh ..." she motioned at her left breast.

His own eyes widened. "Then don't you dare apologise to me! I deserved the slap! I should have been hit harder! If I'm touching you places you don't want me to, then hit me as hard as you need to." He walked rapidly across the room to get away from her.

"Harry, you were asleep!" she said, coming closer. "You didn't know!"

"It was a bad touch, Hermione. Simple as that."

"You're being too hard on yourself -" Hermione began.

"I exist because of where a touch like that can lead to, Hermione! Ask my mother over there!" Both Hermione and Lily went white when they realised the connexion that he was making. "Don't tell me I'm being too hard on myself."

Another voice came from the stairs. "What if she wanted to be touched that way?" They looked up the stairs to see Ginny walking down in a long T-shirt. "I may be eleven, but I ..." She blushed furiously. "I wouldn't be complaining if Harry touched me that way."

Ron's face was a mask of indecision, between wanting to tell off Ginny and talking to Harry, and a few other things that were less obvious on his face. "Listen to her, mate. Ask Hermione if she had a problem with it, first, before you go beating yourself up."

A very small voice from Hermione said, "I wasn't complaining, Harry. And as for touching me like that – I'm the product of where that kind of touch can lead, too. And my parents both wanted me, very badly."

Harry shrugged. "It's not like I could really follow through on it, or anything. Right now, I just know that I shouldn't be touching a girl there. There's no real ... well, how can I say it? Forgive me Hermione, but – so what? You have breasts. So what?"

A look of complete understanding came into her eyes, and she met Ginny's as well, before moving on to Lily. Harry scowled to see it. "Let's see – Nymphadora's got something she can't tell me until I'm older, because I won't understand it until then. Now in one night I've got two other things that no one will explain until I'm older."

Hermione laughed. "Ma'am?" she said, looking at Lily. "May I try to explain?" Lily waved at her to continue. "Harry, how would you have reacted if I'd been facing the other way this summer? For that matter, what would be your reaction right now to seeing me naked?"

He blushed. "Nervous. I don't know why, but you, and Ginny, and all the girls on the Quidditch team make me nervous. Especially Angelina in that night gown she wears."

"How does your body react? Be completely honest with me, Harry," she said.

"Honestly, all the ways that someone reacts when nervous. My hands get a little sweaty, my pulse races a bit, and my breath speeds up."

"Anything else?" Ginny asked, a secret smile on her face.

"No," he replied, and the three women could see that he was serious.

"Well, as George and Fred can tell you, you'll understand completely when the thought of seeing me or Angelina or Ginny naked causes completely different physical reactions. At that point, you won't need an explanation."

He scowled, but nodded. "Thank you, Hermione. At least you're explaining why I don't understand right now." He hugged her gently.

She looked at him and said, "Professor? Could you deal with this mark? I shouldn't have hit him, and I should probably have a matching mark on my own cheek, but it's not fair for him to wear something he didn't deserve."

Lily smiled and waved her wand, and Harry's cheek stopped stinging. She kissed the cheek she'd just healed and headed out of the Tower. "Don't stay up too late talking," she said before the portrait hole closed.

"We need to talk at some point," Hermione said, "but not now. We need to talk after ... well, after what I was talking about a minute ago. Probably in a few months, I guess. It needs to be the four of us."

He nodded. Ginny chose then to speak up. "Guys, I have a problem. Uh, I don't know how to say it, but ... let me show you." She ran back up the stairs, confusing them all, and they were even more confused when she returned holding a diary. "This is a weird diary, Harry; Hermione." She flipped it open. It was utterly empty. "I've been writing in it since the summer."

"It's empty!" Ron said. "Bloody hell! You've gotten your hands on a magical diary."

"There's someone in it, too," she said. "And I've had these black-outs, and I'm wondering if Tom is behind them, and -"

"Hey, we'll figure this out," Harry said, pulling her into a hug. "You think I'm going to let some stupid diary take my girlfriend away from me?" He went to kiss the top of her head, but she looked up at him, and their lips met for a moment. He blinked and pulled away. He

continued to blink for a long moment. "Y'know, that was a lot different from kissing Mum or Grand-mum."

"If you kissed your mum like that," Hermione said a little breathlessly, "there would be a completely different set of problems."

Harry shook himself. "We can't think about that right now. We need to go talk to Dumbledore at this instant. He'll want to know this. I don't know why, but I think this diary is directly connected to all these problems we're having around the school." He grabbed it and Ginny's hand and headed for the portrait hole. The others followed closely behind him.

They were about half of the distance to the Headmaster's office when they were met by Severus Snape. "Even if it is the holidays, there is still a curfew. Five points each from your House. Now get back to your dormitories."

"Sir, please," Ginny said, almost pleading. "We need to talk to the Headmaster – it's really important."

"What could possibly be so important that you would disturb the Headmaster at this hour?" was the question asked with the trademark sneer.

"It involves the Chamber," Harry said.

"And what possible information could you have about it, Evans, unless you happen to be as that fool MacMillan says?"

Harry glared at the Potions professor. "It's at times like this that I wish I was the one opening the Chamber. You'd be next."

"Was that a threat?" Snape asked dangerously.

"How can it be? I'm not the Heir. Even that git Malfoy isn't."

"Tell me what you know and I shall take it to the Headmaster," Snape replied.

Harry looked at him for a long moment. "Since I don't know who it is opening the Chamber, it would be in the best interests of the school to give the information directly to the Headmaster, sir."

"Are you indicating that you do not trust me, Mr. Evans?"

Harry stared him directly in the eyes. "In honesty, and out of a sense of respect, sir, I ask that I not be forced to answer that question in a public forum." He could hear the two girls do a sharp intake of breath.

Snape looked at Harry for a long moment. "Quite Slytherin of you, Evans. Very well. I shall escort you to the Headmaster myself. If it turns out that you were correct concerning the information, I shall even negate your point reduction."

The four students stopped dead in the halls and stared at their teacher before Harry began to laugh. The others looked oddly at him, but all he did was to look at Professor Snape and nod.

In short order they were at the Headmaster's office, being ushered in by the man himself. Fawkes was already looking a little better than the last time that Harry had seen him. "I understand you wish to see me?"

"Yes, sir. Ginny came across some information, and I think that you need to see it." Ginny handed the Headmaster the diary, which was labelled 'T.M. Riddle' and dated fifty years earlier.

"I found this in my things after going to Diagon Alley this summer. Not really sure where it came from, to be honest. I thought that maybe it was from my parents, to use." She blushed furiously, saying nothing about the Weasley finances.

"Understandable," the headmaster said kindly. "May I see this diary?" He took the diary from her and his eyes rose as he saw the name at the bottom. "Oh dear. I've not been certain, but I've thought for years that this young man came to a very bad end. Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"Didn't he get an award for services to the school?" Ron asked. "Yeah, I had to clean his plaque during a detention."

"Yes, but I was never certain that he didn't have more to do with the situation than was publicly known. A student died, and the school was going to be closed. Coincidentally, the culprit was suddenly discovered by Tom, and the supposed perpetrator was sent to Azkaban for a time."

Harry scowled. "I'm hearing a lot of what Uncle Sirius calls 'weasel words'."

"Well, I've never believed that Hagrid did it," Dumbledore said simply. The reaction from the four students was predictable – shock and disbelief.

"Hagrid's as much a killer as James Potter is my dad!" Harry exploded. "Riddle has to have set him up!"

"That has always been my belief, but I have had no proof. Now you have Riddle's diary from the time that it happened. Perhaps it can shed some light on the subject."

"It's blank, sir," Ginny said quietly. "I've been writing in it, and the ink disappears, and he writes back. He's been listening to me as I talked about not trusting Harry, and Tom tried to convince me why I shouldn't. I've got some blank spots in my memory, and ... and they seem to be from around the time that these horrible things have been happening. Tom's been telling me that I've been doing terrible things."

Harry looked at the diary. "I want it destroyed, sir. I don't know how we'll do it, but I want it gone. I want him gone. No one does that to people I care about."

"We may need it to find this Chamber, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I might need a student of Occlumency to go into the diary and find out what they can."

"Occlumency, sir?" Hermione asked, obviously interested in a new field of study.

"The science of occluding one's mind from external forces," Dumbledore said. "I would like to teach it to each of you, if I may. One skilled enough can set up a completely false front for the Legilimens

in question to read.” Anticipating Hermione's next question, he added, “Legilimency is the art of reading the thoughts from another's mind.”

“May we be taught both, sir?” Harry asked.

“We shall start with Occlumency, quite possibly today. Tomorrow, if you measure your days by when you have gone to sleep,” he said with a smile. “Which is what you should be doing now.”

“Yes sir,” he said. With a grin he asked, “Do you think that this information will help with the investigation?”

“Most assuredly, Harry. Most assuredly.”

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They spent the next few months learning Occlumency, and Harry and Ginny came close to losing Gryffindor a few points when they were almost caught several times kissing. Harry had discovered that he rather enjoyed this past-time, and Ginny certainly didn't have any problems with expand his new-found knowledge. They both tended to come back from places a little ruffled.

“I hope you're not doing anything more than kissing,” Hermione said, tight-lipped.

“What else is there?” Harry asked quite seriously.

Hermione smiled. “Never mind.” Harry merely rolled his eyes.

The attacks seemed to have stopped, and the castle seemed to have forgotten about the Heir of Slytherin nonsense. Ernie MacMillan even went so far as to ask Harry in a friendly manner to pass him a bucket of leaping mushrooms in early March. Harry passed them to him, but was less than friendly about it.

He was far friendlier about the day he found Ron and Hermione imitating him and Ginny. She seemed to be enjoying herself, at least, and Ron was not exactly disinterested. There was good-natured joking back and forth between the boys about it, and nothing more was really said.

Professor Sprout was in a good mood. The mandrakes had been caught throwing a raucous party in the greenhouse, which meant that it was not too much longer before they were ready. "When they start trying to move into each other's pots, we'll know they're ready, at which point they can be stewed and an antidote made for the paralysis." Harry found this to be wonderful news.

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The next Quidditch game was against Hufflepuff, and Harry was looking forward to it. The practices had been much better (at least they were far drier), and he was fairly certain that Hufflepuff would go down, but certainly not without a fight. Harry had a great deal of respect for their Seeker, Cedric Diggory.

The day dawned clear and bright. "Perfect Quidditch conditions!" said Wood enthusiastically at the Gryffindor table, loading the team's plates with scrambled eggs. "Harry, buck up there, you need a decent breakfast."

As he left the Great Hall with Ron and Hermione to go and collect his Quidditch things, another very serious worry was added to Harry's growing list. He had just set foot on the marble staircase when he heard it yet again.

"Kill this time ... let me rip ... tear ..."

He shouted aloud and Ron and Hermione both jumped away from him in alarm. "The voice!" said Harry, looking over his shoulder. "I just heard it again – didn't you?"

Ron shook his head, wide-eyed. Hermione, however, clapped a hand to her forehead. "Harry – I think I've just understood something! I've got to go to the library!" She sprinted away, up the stairs.

"What does she understand?" said Harry distractedly, still looking around, trying to tell where the voice had come from.

"Loads more than I do," said Ron, shaking his head.

"But why's she got to go to the library?"

"Because that's what Hermione does," said Ron, shrugging. "When in doubt, go to the library."

Harry stood, irresolute, trying to catch the voice again, but people were now emerging from the Great Hall behind him, talking loudly, exiting through the front doors on their way to the Quidditch pitch.

"You'd better get moving," said Ron. "It's nearly eleven – the match -"

Harry raced up to Gryffindor Tower, collected his Nimbus Two Thousand, and joined the large crowd swarming across the grounds, but his mind was still in the castle along with the bodiless voice, and as he pulled on his scarlet robes in the locker room, his only comfort was that everyone was now outside to watch the game.

The teams walked onto the field to tumultuous applause. Oliver Wood took off for a warm-up flight around the goal posts; Madam Hooch released the balls. The Hufflepuffs, who played in canary yellow, were standing in a huddle, having a last-minute discussion of tactics.

Harry was just mounting his broom when Professor McGonagall came half marching, half running across the pitch, carrying an enormous purple megaphone.

Harry's heart dropped like a stone.

"This match has been cancelled," Professor McGonagall called through the megaphone, addressing the packed stadium. There were boos and shouts. Oliver Wood, looking devastated, landed and ran toward Professor McGonagall without getting off his broomstick.

"But, Professor!" he shouted. "We've got to play – the cup – Gryffindor -"

Professor McGonagall ignored him and continued to shout through her megaphone, "All students are to make their way back to the House common rooms, where their Heads of Houses will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please!"

Then she lowered the megaphone and beckoned Harry over to her. "Evans, I think you'd better come with me ..."

Wondering how she could possibly suspect him this time, Harry saw Ron and Ginny detach themselves from the complaining crowd; they came running up to them as they set off toward the castle. To Harry's surprise, Professor McGonagall didn't object.

"Yes, perhaps you'd better come, too ..."

Some of the students swarming around them were grumbling about the match being cancelled; others looked worried. Harry, Ginny and Ron followed Professor McGonagall back into the school and up the marble staircase. But they weren't taken to anybody's office this time.

"This will be a bit of a shock," said Professor McGonagall in a surprisingly gentle voice as they approached the infirmary. "There has been another attack ... another double attack."

Harry's insides did a horrible somersault. Professor McGonagall pushed the door open and he and Ron entered ...

Madam Pomfrey was bending over a fifth-year girl with long, curly hair. On the bed next to her was -

"Hermione!" Ron groaned. Ginny began to cry softly.

Hermione lay utterly still, her eyes open and glassy.

"They were found near the library," said Professor McGonagall. "I don't suppose either of you can explain this? It was on the floor next to them ..." She was holding up a small, circular mirror.

Harry and Ron shook their heads, both staring at Hermione.

"I will escort you back to Gryffindor Tower," said Professor McGonagall heavily. "I need to address the students in any case."

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"All students will return to their House common rooms by six o'clock in the evening. No student is to leave the dormitories after that time. You will be escorted to each lesson by a teacher. No student is to use the bathroom unaccompanied by a teacher. All further Quidditch

training and matches are to be postponed. There will be no more evening activities."

The Gryffindors packed inside the common room listened to Professor McGonagall in silence. She rolled up the parchment from which she had been reading and said in a somewhat choked voice, "I need hardly add that I have rarely been so distressed. It is likely that the school will be closed unless the culprit behind these attacks is caught. I would urge anyone who thinks they might know anything about them to come forward." She climbed somewhat awkwardly out of the portrait hole, and the Gryffindors began talking immediately.

"That's two Gryffindors down, not counting a Gryffindor ghost, one Ravenclaw, and one Hufflepuff," said the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan, counting on his fingers. "Haven't any of the teachers noticed that the Slytherins are all safe? Isn't it obvious all this stuff's coming from Slytherin? The Heir of Slytherin, the monster of Slytherin – why don't they just chuck all the Slytherins out?" he roared, to nods and scattered applause.

Percy Weasley was sitting in a chair behind Lee, but for once he didn't seem keen to make his views heard. He was looking pale and stunned.

"Percy's in shock," George told Harry quietly. "That Ravenclaw girl – Penelope Clearwater – she's a prefect. I don't think he thought the monster would dare attack a prefect."

But Harry was only half-listening. He didn't seem to be able to get rid of the picture of Hermione, lying on the hospital bed as though carved out of stone. Ron was mirroring Harry, and Ginny was sniffing quietly.

Harry suddenly stood and ran to the portrait hole. "Professor!" he cried out. McGonagall came running back to the Tower faster than he'd ever seen her move before.

"What is it, Evans?" she asked. "Do you have some information?"

"I don't know. I need to talk to the Headmaster. Please. He'll understand. Ron and Ginny should come along as well."

She looked at him for a long moment, and then cast a *Silencio* on the door. "Does this have to do with the diary that you brought to him over the break?" He nodded. "I only found out today myself, but it was apparently stolen recently. I do not know who has taken it."

"We need to find out, Professor," he said with worry. "While the thing was in the Headmaster's hands, we had no attacks. Suddenly, it's gone, and the attacks start back up. That diary is behind this! Please, may we talk to the Headmaster?" He paused. "And maybe see Hermione again?"

"She does not know that you are there, Mr. Evans, but I can understand your need to see her. I will see what I can do. Please wait here until I can manage a meeting with Professor Dumbledore." He nodded and stepped back inside.

It was a short time later that Dumbledore came to the Tower. "Harry, Ronald, Ginny. Would you please accompany me?" He turned to the rest of the Gryffindors, who had stopped talking and were staring in shock. "Before rumours get started, they are not in trouble. I am escorting them to see Miss Granger." The murmuring started again. "Oh, Harry, you may wish to bring a gift that Professor Black gave you last summer. I feel that it could come in quite useful." Harry bounded up the stairs two at a time and quickly retrieved his Invisibility cloak.

They quickly made it to the hospital wing, where they sat with Hermione for a while. Ron kissed her cheek, his eyes suspiciously bright, and Ginny just bit her lower lip. Surprising everyone there, she suddenly did the same thing, quickly kissing Hermione's other cheek. She whispered something that none of them could hear.

Harry just stroked her hand for a time. He missed his friend. He wanted to talk to her about everything. As his thumb trailed along her fingers, which were clenched lightly into a fist, he came across a piece of paper. He looked at it and gently began to work it free of her fingers. As he did, Dumbledore began to speak. "I believe that I know what it is that is attacking everyone. The evidence seems to point in the general direction of a basilisk."

There was silence in the room for a long moment.

“Bugger.”

“Indeed, Mr. Weasley. We have someone who can control the basilisk running through the school, and I for one wish to find them. I could never prove it fifty years ago, but I am quite certain that it was a basilisk that killed Miss Myrtle Ogilvie.”

“Moaning Myrtle!” Ron exclaimed.

“Precisely. I do not know where the entrance to the Chamber is, but I will wager that it is somewhere near her ... a-heh ... 'haunts'.”

Harry finally worked the paper free from Hermione's grasp, and smoothed it out. His eyes widened as he looked at it carefully. “Headmaster, I think that Hermione agrees with you,” he said in a strangled voice as he handed it to the man.

It was a page torn from a very old library book. Harry smoothed it out eagerly and Ron leaned close to read it, too.

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

And beneath this, a single word had been written, in a hand Harry recognized as Hermione's. *Pipes.*

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but heard noise coming toward the hospital wing. “Put on the cloak!” Dumbledore said in a stage whisper. He quickly pulled Ron and Ginny close and flipped the cloak over themselves.

Minerva McGonagall entered the room with a disapproving look on her face. “The Ministry is here.”

The man in question had rumpled gray hair and an anxious expression, and was wearing a strange mixture of clothes: a pinstriped suit, a scarlet tie, a long black cloak, and pointed purple boots. Under his arm he carried a lime-green bowler.

"That's Dad's boss!" Ron breathed. "Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic!" Harry elbowed Ron hard to make him shut up.

"How may I help you, Cornelius?" Dumbledore asked in a friendly tone.

"I'm afraid that I need to ... ah, well ... Hagrid, Albus. We need to take him in."

Dumbledore scowled. "I do not believe that Hagrid had anything to do with this, Cornelius. I would like to clear his record for the last one, since we know what he released, and what killed the girl."

"I understand, Dumbledore, but the people need to have faith in the Ministry. We have to be seen doing something."

"So you will detain an innocent man in Azkaban for the sake of 'doing something'?" There was a fire in the Headmaster's eyes that Harry could not have imagined being there before. "And when will he be released?"

"When the true culprit is found, of course. Then Hagrid will be released."

"I am strongly opposed to this, Cornelius," Dumbledore stated.

"You have nothing to say about it," Fudge finally barked. "The Board of Governors ..."

"Interesting that you should refer to them, Minister Fudge," an oily voice said as he came into the room. "I have just come from them, and it seems that they have no confidence in Professor Dumbledore's ability to solve this crisis. We decided in a unanimous vote to remove him from the position. We feel that it's time for you to step aside. This is an Order of Suspension – you'll find all twelve signatures on it. I'm afraid we feel you're losing your touch. How many attacks have there

been now? Two more this afternoon, wasn't it? At this rate, there'll be no Muggle-borns left at Hogwarts, and we all know what an awful loss that would be to the school."

"Oh, now, see here, Lucius," said Fudge, looking alarmed, "Dumbledore suspended – no, no – last thing we want just now ..."

"The appointment – or suspension – of the headmaster is a matter for the governors, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy smoothly. "And as Dumbledore has failed to stop these attacks -"

"See here, Malfoy, if Dumbledore can't stop them," said Fudge, whose upper lip was sweating now, "I mean to say, who can?"

"That remains to be seen," said Mr. Malfoy with a nasty smile. "But being as all twelve of us have voted -"

"If the governors want my removal, Lucius, I shall of course step aside -"

"But -" stuttered Fudge.

Dumbledore had not taken his bright blue eyes off Lucius Malfoy's cold gray ones. "However," said Dumbledore, speaking very slowly and clearly so that none of them could miss a word, "you will find that I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me. You will also find that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it."

"Admirable sentiments," said Malfoy, bowing. "We shall all miss your – er – highly individual way of running things, Albus, and only hope that your successor will manage to prevent any – ah – killings."

The three gentlemen left the infirmary quickly. Harry was shaking in fury. "That Malfoy's behind this whole thing, I'll bet. I swear if I ever discover that man is my father, I'll end up in Azkaban for tearing him apart with my bare hands."

"What are we going to do?" Ginny squeaked. "With Dumbledore gone, whoever is doing it is bound to start killing!"

"We need to find who took the diary," Harry said. "Take it back, and find a way to destroy the damned thing. We need to find Sirius and Peter and Remus."

The three walked carefully out of the wing, working hard to stay together as they walked. They quickly located one of the secret entrances that even the twins knew nothing about and quickly took it, skirting their way to the teachers wing by hopping from passage to passage. Finally, they stood before Sirius' suite. Harry was about to knock on the door when he heard "Oh, Sirius," from inside. It sounded rather romantic in nature, and he was now in a battle as to whether or not he should interrupt. Finally pragmatism won the day, and he rapped sharply on the door.

The door was opened by a somewhat annoyed Sirius in a bathrobe. "Harry! Ron! Ginny! What are you three doing here? You should be in your dormitory! Get in here!"

Once the door closed, Harry said, "You can come out too, Mum. You'll need to hear this as well." Lily Evans walked out in her own bathrobe, looking sheepish. He smiled for just a moment before quickly launching into his description of what had happened.

"Malfoy," growled Sirius. "He's wanted to run either this school or the government for years. Looks like he's finally gotten one of his wishes."

"He's been a pain in our family's ... uh -" Ron started, and then realised the language he was going to use in front of adults.

"He's been a pain in everyone's arses for a while, Ron," Sirius laughed.

"I just ... he ... he picked a fight with Dad in Diagon Alley this last summer. There we were, buying our books, when he and that little ... thing ... that he calls a son bump into us, hard enough to make Ginny's and my books go spilling. Of course they were 'nice' enough to help us pick them up, after Mr. Malfoy rapped Draco across the back of the head."

"Do you think he supplied the diary?" Ginny asked. "It didn't show up until after we'd been to Diagon Alley."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Sirius said. "Question is, what do we do now?"

"We need to find that entrance to the Chamber and see if we can find the basilisk," Harry said.

"What do you mean, 'we'?" Lily asked dangerously.

"How goes your parseltongue studies, Mum?" he asked in reply. "We need to try to talk to it. Maybe we can get it to stop. I can talk to it instinctively. You or Padma or any of the others would have to think about it."

"I just don't like putting you in danger, Harry," she said.

"Hey, you've got a spare son," he said, followed quickly with an "Ow!" as both Ron and Ginny walloped the back of his head. "I was joking!"

"It wasn't funny!" Ginny growled. "Despite what our idiot Defence teacher thinks, you're worth something in your own right."

"You don't like James very much," Sirius said with a slight smirk. She just looked at Sirius with a dark look.

"There's not much to like about the man," Ron said. "I mean, I know that I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer – that's what we've got Hermione for – but even I can see that James is Harry's father. Harry's stuck looking like that git, but at least he's got your eyes, ma'am." He suddenly realised how that sounded and blushed furiously.

"Doesn't say much for what you think of her choices," Harry said. "She was married to him, after all." Ron turned white at the comment.

"No, Harry, it doesn't say anything like that," she admonished him. "All it meant was that he thinks I have pretty eyes, from the way he blushed."

Harry scowled again. "I'm sorry, Ron. I'm being a prat again, aren't I?" Ron just waved him off.

"Back to the important things," Sirius said, eyes twinkling.

Harry grinned. "You're right. I'll find Uncle Remus and Peter, and you two can get back to the important things." His own eyes twinkled as the two of them blushed.

"It ... it doesn't bother you?" Lily asked, worry evident in her voice.

"Would it end up with me calling Uncle Sirius 'Dad'?" he asked, trying for impudent, but managing hopeful instead.

Lily simply gasped and pulled Harry tightly into her arms, looking at Sirius as she did. "It just might, my beautiful boy." Sirius looked as if he'd been slapped with a wet fish.

Ginny's happy snuffle somehow managed to bring them back on track. Ron was dealing with suspiciously bright eyes, but wasn't about to admit anything. "We need to find that diary before we can worry about whether or not Sirius will be my dad some day."

"Let's all get some sleep, and we'll worry about this in the morning, alright?" Sirius asked. When the children nodded, he pulled out a mirror. "Moony; Wormtail – come in, you two."

The mirror clouded and then showed Peter's face, which was shunted sideways as Remus answered as well. "What's up, Padfoot?"

"Need you to come by and escort some kids back to their dorm. They had an idea they needed to run past a trusted professor or two."

"They still there?" Peter asked.

"No, I ran off to join the circus, Uncle Peter," Harry said with a grin. "You might want to get here soon – I interrupted Mum and Sirius in something."

"Oh Merlin," Remus breathed, sounding slightly worried.

“Come pick us up and I'll explain,” Sirius said. A few minutes later there was another knock at the door, and Peter and Remus entered. Sirius explained quickly what the three children had told him, with little input from Harry or the other two. “Hope you didn't think I was stealing your thunder, you three.”

“Nah,” Ron said. “If you'd gotten anything wrong, we'd have corrected you.” He grinned at the History of Magic teacher.

“Besides,” Lily said, “you did keep telling them, 'Harry says' and 'Ron says' and 'Ginny says'. I think the other two sort of realise that you didn't come up with it on your own.” She laughed, and Harry noticed it was the happiest laugh he'd heard from her in quite some time. They said their good nights and the students were led back to Gryffindor Tower.

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They talked about it for a while the next morning. “If Basilisks are supposed to kill by sight, then how come no one has died yet?” Ginny asked, sitting on Harry's bed. He was against the head board, with her leaning back against his chest. Ron sat at the end of the bed. She shivered. “Not that I want anyone to have died.”

“I know, but think about it. Except for one person, it was sheer dumb luck. Justin saw it through Sr Nicholas. Nicholas got a full blast of it, but how do you kill someone who is already dead? Colin was looking through his camera. Miss Clearwater was likely looking at a reflection. Hermione had that mirror with her.”

“What about Mrs. Norris?” Ron asked.

“Remember all that water on the floor? Any bets she saw the basilisk in the reflection of the water?”

“What do we do now?” Ginny asked. “For that matter, how is it getting around?”

“That's why Hermione wrote 'pipes' on the page,” Harry said after a moment's thought. “It's big, it's fast, and it moves through the pipes. Maybe the entrance is ... where would be a good place for the

entrance?" He smacked his forehead lightly as if he might dislodge an errant thought that might point him in the right direction.

"How about Moaning Myrtle's bathroom?" Ginny asked. "Not only did Dumbledore suggest something of the sort, I have vague memories of being in there."

"We need to go talk to Da ... uh, Padfoot and the rest. They should be able to help us." Ginny and Ron smirked as they heard his comment.

Ginny started to get up from the bed, and suddenly Harry understood what Nymphadora and Hermione weren't telling him before. Ginny had moved in a certain way, and suddenly, before their bodies had even lost contact with each other, he had taken the next step into puberty. She spun to look at him, her eyes glancing downward for just a moment. Harry responded by blushing furiously. "Why now?" he grumbled. "Why couldn't it have been during the summer, when I'd have time to understand it better?"

They left the Tower to head to breakfast, but when they saw that none of the Marauders plus one were there, they slipped out and began to head toward the teachers quarters. They were near the teachers lounge when they heard a voice echo through the halls – it was Professor McGonagall, the deputy Headmistress.

"All students to return to their House dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staff room. Immediately, please."

Harry wheeled around to stare at Ron. "Not another attack? Not now?"

"What'll we do?" said Ron, aghast. "Go back to the dormitory?"

"No," said Harry, glancing around. There was an ugly sort of wardrobe to his left, full of the teachers' cloaks. "In here. Let's hear what it's all about. Then we can tell them what we've found out."

They hid themselves inside it, listening to the rumbling of hundreds of people moving overhead, and the staff room door banging open. From between the musty folds of the cloaks, they watched the

teachers filtering into the room. Some of them were looking puzzled, others downright scared. Then Professor McGonagall arrived.

"It has happened," she told the silent staff room. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Professor Sinistra let out a squeal. Professor Sprout clapped her hands over her mouth. Snape gripped the back of a chair very hard and said, "How can you be sure?"

"The Heir of Slytherin," said Professor McGonagall, who was very white, "left another message. Right underneath the first one. 'His skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.' "

Professor Evans burst into tears.

"Who is it?" said Madam Hooch, who had sunk, weak-kneed, into a chair. "Which student?"

"Draco Malfoy," said Professor McGonagall. "We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow," she added, near to tears, it seemed. "This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said. ..."

The door slammed open to showcase Sirius. "Where's Harry? I can't find him anywhere!" The man sounded nearly frantic. *The same way Mum was when I ran away when I was seven*, he thought stupidly.

"Oh no!" Lily shrieked and jumped to her feet. She ran into Sirius's arms and began to sob in earnest. James Potter had an interesting look on his face, one that seemed to mix hurt and happiness.

Harry felt lower than a flobberworm's intestines right then. He stepped out of the wardrobe. "I'm right here," he said.

"Evans!" bellowed Snape. "For your blatant ..."

"Shut up, Severus," James said. "The boy was obviously here for a reason. Let's here it."

"The thing down in the Chamber is a basilisk," he stated.

Stony silence met his comment, except for the four teachers who had heard Dumbledore's suppositions from Harry. "How, pray tell, did you come to this conclusion?" Potter asked, disdain in his voice.

"No one looked at it directly, so they were merely petrified. Except for fifty years ago, and she's still haunting the bathroom she died in. There was a reason that the roosters were killed. It's a gigantic serpent, so I've been able to hear it speaking. And the Headmaster came to the same conclusion. We need to go down and deal with it," he finished.

"What's with this 'we' business?" Potter asked.

"I'm a parselmouth. We may even be able to stop the thing without having to kill it."

"You want a basilisk running around?" McGonagall asked, incredulous.

"Given his father, does that surprise you?" Potter grumbled softly.

"Excuse me for a moment, Headmistress," Pettigrew said softly before walking over to James Potter and breaking his nose in one movement, which left the man quite literally stunned. "Now, continue, please."

"I don't want to face this thing alone – to be honest, I don't want to face it at all. But it needs to be talked to, and see if it can be pulled back from its murderous rampage. We've been lucky that no one has died."

"Who should go?" Lily asked.

"Well, I need to," Harry said, "because I'm the only one who can get into the Chamber, I think. At least for right now. We'll need the school's best fighters. That would likely mean Professor Potter, Uncle Remus – I'm sorry – Professor Lupin, and also Professor Black. I don't know who else."

Sirius surprised everyone by saying, "I'd suggest bringing Severus Snape down as well. He's one of the best all-around fighters I know."

"I'd prefer not to, since she's not a fighter, but we could bring Padma with us to verify my statements as far as what the basilisk is saying. She's got too much integrity to lie just to get on my good side, and that helps Professor Potter trust what I'm saying, since it's likely the only way he will trust me."

"He would be outnumbered," Professor Snape said. "I will trust your word concerning whatever this basilisk says, and I doubt that Lupin or Black would distrust what you say."

"We should leave as soon as we can get our things together," James Potter said. "Meet back here in about thirty minutes?"

"Make it Moaning Myrtle's bathroom," Harry said. "I'm fairly certain that's where the entrance to the Chamber is." Potter nodded, and the four adults left to gather what they thought they might need.

"Can we go to that bathroom? I want to verify with Myrtle," Harry said. McGonagall, Lily and Peter nodded and led him down to the girls bathroom. Harry had the sneaking suspicion that they were being followed by a pair of Weasleys.

They entered and found Moaning Myrtle sitting on the tank of the end toilet.

"Oh, it's you," she said when she saw Harry. "What do you want this time?"

"To ask you how you died," said Harry.

Myrtle's whole aspect changed at once. She looked as though she had never been asked such a flattering question.

"Ooooh, it was dreadful," she said with relish. "It happened right in here. I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then —" Myrtle swelled importantly, her face shining. "I died."

"How?" said Harry.

"I've no idea," said Myrtle in hushed tones. "I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away ..." She looked dreamily at Harry. "And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she'd ever laughed at my glasses."

"Where exactly did you see the eyes?" said Harry.

"Somewhere there," said Myrtle, pointing vaguely toward the sink in front of her toilet.

It looked like an ordinary sink. They examined every inch of it, inside and out, including the pipes below. And then Harry saw it – scratched on the side of one of the copper taps was a tiny snake. "That tap's never worked," said Myrtle brightly as he tried to turn it.

Harry glared at it for a long moment, thinking out loud. "I need to wait for them anyway, but ... it's got to be a parseltongue password. Maybe something like saying 'open' in snake language. I don't dare test until they get here, though."

"Good thinking, Harry," Lily said. "I can't lose ... please be careful down there. I love you more than I will ever be able to put into words. Please come back safe, baby boy," she finished in a croon, hugging him tightly.

"I will, Mum. I just plan on talking to it, and if we have to kill it, then I'll step back and let the professionals do it."

"Good thinking," Potter said as he entered the bathroom. His robes looked to be dragon hide. The other three entered, attired similarly. "Now, I think that everyone needs to get out of the way, in case the creature is just below us in the pipes. If you would, Harry," he said.

Harry concentrated on the snake carving and thought hard about speaking to Kali. "Open," he said.

The tap glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. Next second, the sink began to move; the sink, in fact, sank, right out of

sight, leaving a large pipe exposed, a pipe wide enough for a man to slide into.

The pipe looked slimy, and Harry scowled. How ... he began to think, but an idea suddenly struck him. He stepped closer and said "Stairs," in parseltongue, and suddenly the pipe altered into a stairway. "Moving stairs."

"You repeated yourself there," Sirius said. "I recognised that." He seemed proud of himself.

"Well, when I figured that it was not likely that Salazar Slytherin was willing to slide down a slimy tube, that meant that there was more that could be done, so I demanded stairs." He blushed. "Then I asked for an escalator – moving stairs. We won't know until we step on them."

James Potter nodded. "No time like the present, then." He stepped on the top step and the staircase began to move slowly, taking him downward. Sirius stepped on next, followed by the other two adults, and finally Harry.

He sank slowly down the tube, going quite a distance before reaching the bottom. It was a dark stone tunnel with a damp floor, and he knew he'd have to watch his step. "We must be miles under the school," he said softly, his voice echoing in the black tunnel.

"Under the lake, probably," said Remus, looking around at the dark, slimy walls.

"*Lumos!*" James said, and a beam of light shot from his wand. "Remember, any sign of movement, close your eyes right away ..."

But the tunnel was quiet as the grave, and the first unexpected sound they heard was a loud crunch as Harry stepped on what turned out to be a rat's skull. Harry lowered his wand to look at the floor and saw that it was littered with small animal bones. Trying very hard not to imagine what Draco might look like if they found him, Harry led the way forward, around a dark bend in the tunnel. He hated the guy, but it didn't mean that he wanted him eaten by a basilisk.

"Hold," James said suddenly. "There's something up ahead -"

They froze, watching. Harry could just see the outline of something huge and curved, lying right across the tunnel. It wasn't moving. "Maybe it's asleep," he breathed, glancing at the others. Harry turned back to look at the thing, his heart beating so fast it hurt. Very slowly, his eyes as narrow as he could make them and still see, Harry edged forward with the others, his wand held high. The light slid over a gigantic snake skin, of a vivid, poisonous green, lying curled and empty across the tunnel floor. The creature that had shed it must have been twenty feet long at least.

"We must harvest this," Severus said softly. "There are potions that can be made with the powdered skin of a basilisk, including one that will reverse the effects of petrification. The sale of what was left would make us all rich beyond the dreams of avarice."

"We'll worry about that after we've got the Malfoy boy back, safe and sound," Potter said quietly. "Work for you, Severus?" The Potions master simply nodded.

They walked a bit further down the hallway. Harry was noticing some small cracks in the stone, and began to worry about the weight of the entire lake crashing down on them. Once again, he seemed to show mild prescience. The group had spread apart slightly, and unknown to Harry, who had been exploring the walls as he walked, the others had stopped to check on something. There was a creaking noise in the rock, and suddenly a crack. "Harry!" was the last thing Harry heard other than crashing rocks for a minute or so.

When the dust had settled, he looked to the rockfall. "Are you there?" he shouted

"Harry! Are you hurt?" came a muffled voice. He was fairly sure it was Sirius.

"No. I was too far away from it to be hit by anything.," he shouted back.

"Wait there! We're working our way through!" Sirius shouted.

"Draco's been down here for Merlin knows how long!" he yelled back. "I've got to see if I can at least find him."

"Harry!" came the shouted response. "No! Wait for us!"

"See you in a bit," said Harry, trying to inject some confidence into his shaking voice. And he set off alone.

Soon the distant noise of the shifting of the rocks was gone. The tunnel turned and turned again. Every nerve in Harry's body was tingling unpleasantly. He wanted the tunnel to end, yet dreaded what he'd find when it did. And then, at last, as he crept around yet another bend, he saw a solid wall ahead on which two entwined serpents were carved, their eyes set with great, glinting emeralds.

Harry approached, his throat very dry. There was no need to pretend these stone snakes were real; their eyes looked strangely alive. "Bugger." He could guess what he had to do. He cleared his throat, and the emerald eyes seemed to flicker. "*Open*," said Harry, in a low, faint hiss.

The serpents parted as the wall cracked open, the halves slid smoothly out of sight, and Harry, shaking from head to foot, walked inside.

He was standing at the end of a very long, dimly lit chamber. Towering stone pillars entwined with more carved serpents rose to support a ceiling lost in darkness, casting long, black shadows through the odd, greenish gloom that filled the place.

His heart beating very fast, Harry stood listening to the chill silence. Could the basilisk be lurking in a shadowy corner, behind a pillar? And where was Draco?

He pulled out his wand and moved forward between the serpentine columns. Every careful footstep echoed loudly off the shadowy walls. He kept his eyes narrowed, ready to clamp them shut at the smallest sign of movement. The hollow eye sockets of the stone snakes seemed to be following him. More than once, with a jolt of the stomach, he thought he saw one stir.

Then, as he drew level with the last pair of pillars, a statue high as the Chamber itself loomed into view, standing against the back wall. Harry had to crane his neck to look up into the giant face above: It

was ancient and monkeyish, with a long, thin beard that fell almost to the bottom of the wizard's sweeping stone robes, where two enormous gray feet stood on the smooth Chamber floor. And between the feet, face-down, lay a black-robed figure with pale hair.

"Draco!" he said, running toward the boy. He flung his wand aside, grabbed Draco's shoulders, and turned him over. His face was white as marble, and as cold, yet his eyes were closed, so he wasn't Petrified. But then he must be -

"Wake up, damn you! We've got a basilisk to get away from!" Nothing. "Snape's going to take points from Slytherin if you don't wake up!" Still nothing. An evil thought ran through Harry's head. "They'll resort you into Gryffindor if you don't wake up!" He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw the blonde boy twitch.

"He won't wake," said a soft voice.

Harry jumped and spun around on his knees. A tall, black-haired boy was leaning against the nearest pillar, watching. He was strangely blurred around the edges, as though Harry were looking at him through a misted window.

"What do you mean, he won't wake?" Harry said desperately. "He's not ...?"

"He's still alive," said Riddle. "But only just."

Harry stared at him. "Are you a ghost?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"A memory," said Riddle quietly. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years." He pointed toward the floor near the statue's giant toes. Lying open there was the little black diary Harry had found in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"You're Tom Riddle, aren't you?"

"Quite good, Harry Potter." Harry now noted that Riddle was twirling his wand between his fingers.

"It's Evans. And give me my wand back."

"You won't be needing it," Riddle said.

Harry stared at him. "What d'you mean, I won't be ...?"

"I've waited a long time for this, Harry Potter," said Riddle. "For the chance to see you. To speak to you."

"Look," said Harry, losing patience, "I don't think you get it. We're in the Chamber of Secrets. We can talk later -"

"We're going to talk now," said Riddle, still smiling broadly, and he pocketed Harry's wand.

Harry stared at him. There was something very funny going on here... "How did Draco get like this?" he asked slowly.

"Well, that's an interesting question," said Riddle pleasantly. "And quite a long story. I suppose the real reason Draco Malfoy's like this is because Ginny Weasley opened her heart and spilled all her secrets to an invisible stranger. And then Malfoy here wanted revenge and did the same."

"What are you talking about?" said Harry.

"The diary," said Riddle. "My diary. Ginny had been wrote in it for months and months, telling me all her pitiful worries and woes – how her brothers tease her, how she had to come to school with second-hand robes and books, how" – Riddle's eyes glinted – "how she didn't think famous, good, great Harry Potter should ever forgive her for what she did ..."

All the time he spoke, Riddle's eyes never left Harry's face. There was an almost hungry look in them. "It's very boring, having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven-year-old girl," he went on. "But I was patient. I wrote back. I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply loved me. 'No one's ever understood me like you, Tom ... I'm so glad I've got this diary to confide in ... It's like having a friend I can carry around in my pocket ...'"

Riddle laughed, a high, cold laugh that didn't suit him. It made the hairs stand up on the back of Harry's neck. "If I say it myself, Harry,

I've always been able to charm the people I needed. So Ginny poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted...I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Weasley. Powerful enough to start feeding Miss Weasley a few of my secrets, to start pouring a little of my soul back into her..."

"What do you mean?" said Harry, whose mouth had gone very dry.

"Haven't you guessed yet, Harry Potter?" said Riddle softly. "Ginny Weasley opened the Chamber of Secrets the first time. She killed the school roosters and daubed threatening messages on the walls. She set the Serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods, and the Squib's cat."

"Because you were in control of her," Harry snarled.

"Ah, ah, ah," Tom said in an admonishing tone. "I'm the one in charge here, and I didn't give you permission to speak, other than to ask questions."

"Of course, she didn't know what she was doing at first. It was very amusing. I wish you could have seen her new diary entries ... far more interesting, they became ... 'Dear Tom,'" he recited, watching Harry's horrified face, "'I think I'm losing my memory. There are rooster feathers all over my robes and I don't know how they got there.' 'Dear Tom, I can't remember what I did on the night of Halloween, but a cat was attacked and I've got paint all down my front.' 'Dear Tom, Percy keeps telling me I'm pale and I'm not myself. I think he suspects me ... There was another attack today and I don't know where I was. Tom, what am I going to do? I think I'm going mad ... I think I'm the one attacking everyone, Tom! It took a very long time for stupid little Ginny to stop trusting her diary,'" said Riddle. "But she finally became suspicious and tried to dispose of it. She was even successful, and it ended up in the hands of someone even weaker-minded than her." He pointed to Draco. "The little fool was willing to do anything for power. I've never had so easy a mental conquest. He simply let me take over. I made him write his own suicide note, and came down here, waiting for you. From what I knew of that mewling little red-headed peasant, you couldn't even let your

worst enemy die at my hands." He paused. "I always knew Gryffindors were stupid."

"I was almost a Slytherin. In fact, my reason for being in Gryffindor is rather Slytherin, I was told."

Riddle raised his eyebrows, but quickly dismissed Harry's comments. "This did lead to the one thing I really wanted, though – to meet you."

"And why did you want to meet me?" said Harry. Anger was coursing through him, and it was an effort to keep his voice steady.

"Well, you see, Ginny told me all about you, Harry," said Riddle. "Your whole fascinating history." His eyes roved over the lightning scar on Harry's forehead, and their expression grew hungrier. "I knew I must find out more about you, talk to you, meet you if I could. I have many questions for you, Harry Potter."

"Evans, you stupid git. What sort of questions?" Harry spat, fists still clenched.

"Well," said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, "how is it that you a skinny boy with no extraordinary magical talent – managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did you escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort's powers were destroyed?" There was an odd red gleam in his hungry eyes now.

"Why do you care how I escaped?" said Harry slowly. "Voldemort was after your time..."

"Voldemort," said Riddle softly, "is my past, present, and future, Harry Potter..."

He pulled Harry's wand from his pocket and began to trace it through the air, writing three shimmering words:

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves:

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

"You see?" he whispered. "It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts, to my most intimate friends only, of course. You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father's name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother's side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry -- I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!"

"You're not," he said, his quiet voice full of hatred.

"Not what?" snapped Riddle.

"Not the greatest sorcerer in the world," said Harry. "Sorry to disappoint you and all that, but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so. Even when you were strong, you didn't dare try and take over at Hogwarts. Dumbledore saw through you when you were at school and he still frightens you now, wherever you're hiding these days -"

The smile had gone from Riddle's face, to be replaced by a very ugly look.

"Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere memory of me!" he hissed.

"He's not as gone as you might think!" Harry retorted. He was speaking at random, wanting to scare Riddle, wishing rather than believing it to be true.

Riddle opened his mouth, but froze.

Music was coming from somewhere. Riddle whirled around to stare down the empty Chamber. The music was growing louder. It was eerie, spine-tingling, unearthly; it lifted the hair on Harry's scalp and made his heart feel as though it was swelling to twice its normal size. Then, as the music reached such a pitch that Harry felt it vibrating inside his own ribs, flames erupted at the top of the nearest pillar.

A crimson bird the size of a swan had appeared, piping its weird music to the vaulted ceiling. It had a glittering golden tail as long as a peacock's and gleaming golden talons, which were gripping a ragged bundle.

A second later, the bird was flying straight at Harry. It dropped the ragged thing it was carrying at his feet, then landed heavily on his shoulder. As it folded its great wings, Harry looked up and saw it had a long, sharp golden beak and a beady black eye.

The bird stopped singing. It sat still and warm next to Harry's cheek, gazing steadily at Riddle.

"That's a phoenix," said Riddle, staring shrewdly back at it.

"Fawkes?" Harry breathed, and he felt the bird's golden claws squeeze his shoulder gently.

"And that - " said Riddle, now eyeing the ragged thing that Fawkes had dropped, "that's the old school Sorting Hat - "

So it was. Patched, frayed, and dirty, the hat lay motionless at Harry's feet.

Riddle began to laugh again. He laughed so hard that the dark chamber rang with it, as though ten Riddles were laughing at once.

"This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?"

Harry didn't answer. He might not see what use Fawkes or the Sorting Hat were, but he was no longer alone, and he waited for Riddle to stop laughing with his courage mounting.

"To business, Harry," said Riddle, still smiling broadly. "Twice – in your past, in my future – we have met. And twice I failed to kill you. How did you survive? Tell me everything. The longer you talk," he added softly, "the longer you stay alive."

Harry was thinking fast, weighing his chances. Riddle had the wand. He, Harry, had Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, neither of which would

be much good in a duel. It looked bad, all right ... but the longer Riddle stood there, the more life was dwindling out of Ginny ... and in the meantime, Harry noticed suddenly, Riddle's outline was becoming clearer, more solid ... If it had to be a fight between him and Riddle, better sooner than later.

"No one knows why you lost your powers when you attacked me," said Harry abruptly. "I don't know myself. But my only real assumption as to why you failed to kill me is that you're an incompetent nincompoop who relies on fear rather than actual talent." He was mentally crossing his fingers that he could drive Riddle to act without thinking. "I've seen the real you, you know. I saw you last year. You're a wreck. You're barely alive. That's where all your power got you. You're in hiding. You're ugly, you're foul -"

Riddle's face contorted. Then he forced it into an awful smile. "I can see now ... there is nothing special about you, after all. I wondered, you see. There are strange likenesses between us, after all. Even you must have noticed. Both half-bloods. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself. We even look something alike ... but after all, it was merely a lucky chance that saved you from me. That's all I wanted to know."

Harry stood, tense, waiting for Riddle to raise his wand. But Riddle's twisted smile was widening again. "Now, Harry, I'm going to teach you a little lesson about insulting your betters. Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin, against famous Harry Potter, and the best weapons Dumbledore can give him ..."

He cast an amused eye over Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, then walked away. Harry, fear spreading up his numb legs, watched Riddle stop between the high pillars and look up into the stone face of Slytherin, high above him in the half-darkness. Riddle opened his mouth wide and hissed – but Harry understood what he was saying...

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four."

Harry wheeled around to look up at the statue, Fawkes swaying on his shoulder.

Slytherin's gigantic stone face was moving. Horror-struck, Harry saw his mouth opening, wider and wider, to make a huge black hole. Something was stirring inside the statue's mouth. Something was slithering up from its depths.

Harry backed away until he hit the dark Chamber wall, and as he shut his eyes tight he felt Fawkes' wing sweep his cheek as he took flight. Harry wanted to shout, "Don't leave me!" but what chance did a phoenix have against the king of serpents?

Something huge hit the stone floor of the Chamber. Harry felt it shudder -- he knew what was happening, he could sense it, could almost see the giant serpent uncoiling itself from Slytherin's mouth. Then he heard Riddle's hissing voice:

"Kill him."

Harry decided to take his chance. *"Don't listen to him!"* He aimed his face down and opened his eyes.

Who are you to talk to me?

"One who understands you and has no desire to use you until you are no good any more."

"Shut up, Potter! Don't listen to him!"

You both tell me not to listen to the other. Why not?

"I am your master! You must listen to me!"

"I don't want to be your master. I just want the damage to stop. No killings. We can find things to feed you, but there is no need to kill indiscriminately."

I must follow the orders of those who speak my tongue.

"Then kill him!" Riddle screamed. The basilisk reared back.

"Ignore everything the other speakers have ever told you," Harry said in a flash of brilliance.

The basilisk reared back. Yes! it roared into the Chamber. *I am free! Thank you, scarred one! I will do as you ask, when you ask, in thanks for what you have given me.*

"Kill him, you foolish beast!" Riddle shrieked into the dark room.

I do not follow your bidding any more, wizard, nor the words that your ancestor forced upon me. I follow the words of the scarred one now. The beast slid back toward the same hole that it had entered the Chamber by. *Until later, serpent friend.*

While Riddle looked stunned as the basilisk slithered away, Harry moved behind one of the pillars and pulled the Hat onto his head. *You're supposed to be able to help me somehow,* he thought at it. *Now would be a good time.*

There was no answering voice. Instead, the hat contracted, as though an invisible hand was squeezing it very tightly.

Something very hard and heavy thudded onto the top of Harry's head, almost knocking him out. Stars winking in front of his eyes, he grabbed the top of the hat to pull it off and felt something long and hard beneath it.

A gleaming silver sword had appeared inside the hat, its handle glittering with rubies the size of eggs.

Gripping it, Harry stepped out from behind the pillar. "It's just you and me now, Tom," he said.

He looked into Harry's face. "I think I prefer it this way, Potter. Just you and me, Harry Potter ... you and me ..."

"It's Evans, you git. You actually expected that Dweezil the Wonder Hamster over there told you the truth? He thinks that I'm going to go berserk if he calls me James Potter's son. Personally, I think it's fitting that you're going to be defeated by the son of one of your followers. Might even be that his father is my father. I'll likely never know."

"I've got years of experience on you," Riddle sneered.

Harry started to retort, but noticed how solid Riddle was looking. *Crap, how do I stop him from killing Malfoy?*

He was answered by a musical trilling near Draco. Fawkes was sitting near the diary, pecking at it. He was distracted away by Riddle screaming "*Reducto!*" Without thinking, Harry swung the blade, surprising himself and Riddle by parrying the blast up into the face of Salazar Slytherin. The parry had lessened some of the force, so all that happened was the breaking of the nose on the statue.

The sword was humming with power at the moment, and Harry found himself curious. He pointed the weapon at Riddle and said, "*Expelliarmus!*"

A huge beam shot from the sword and hit Riddle, blowing him back a good thirty feet. Harry grabbed his wand out of the air and ran to Fawkes. "What do you want me to do, Fawkes?"

The bird tapped the sword for a moment, and then tapped the diary. He repeated this a few times until the light dawned in Harry's eyes.

He jammed the point of the sword down into the diary. "*Incendio!*" The cover of the book began to crackle, and Riddle began to scream. He jabbed the point down into the book a few times, getting a bright flash every time, and ink began to gout from the book in such quantities as to actually extinguish the fire. Riddle's screams continued as he writhed and rocked back and forth – and suddenly he was gone. No fade out; no explosion – just gone. The diary was utterly ruined – wet with ink and smouldering in a spot or two, there was a hole completely through it.

He pointed the sword at the Hat and called it to him – it may have been a fourth year spell, but that didn't mean that he hadn't been taught it yet. He caught it deftly and picked up the diary as he heard two things – Draco awakening, and the sound of adult feet pounding down the hallway.

"Potter!" Malfoy exclaimed as he awoke. "What are you doing here?"

"Saving your life, you git. You gave blanket approval to Riddle to do whatever he wanted, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about?" James Potter asked as the four adults came running in.

"This diary was a magical item that housed the memories of Tom Marvolo Riddle. He took over Draco and made him write the message on the wall."

"What about the basilisk?" Potter asked.

"It's no longer a threat," Harry answered.

"Where's the body then, Evans?" Snape sneered at him.

"I didn't say I'd killed him, I said that the basilisk was no longer a problem."

Potter leaned forward and nearly screamed in Harry's face, "You just let a dark creature slither away to kill some more?"

"No, I freed him of the control that both Slytherin and Voldemort had put him under," Harry said softly.

"What guarantees do we have that it will stay silent?" Potter asked dangerously.

Harry snapped. "None, 'Dad'," he said sarcastically. "We have the same guarantees that it will stay quiet that we have about my parentage. None. We have the same guarantee that I'll not someday go of raping and murdering just like my real father, 'Dad'." He stopped and took a deep breath. "All I know is that it thanked me when I freed it from Tom's control, and told me that if I ever needed it, it would come to help me. And it left, when it could have been trying to kill everything in this Chamber."

"Fifty points for your insolence," Potter growled. "And don't ever call me Dad again, under any circumstances."

Harry laughed. "I can guarantee that, sir," Harry grumbled. "I will publicly state here and now, and will do so later if you desire, that you have not been and never will be my father. Is that good enough for you?"

"I can take another fifty points, Evans," Potter said.

"Take every last one of them! I don't care! I just dealt with the physical memory of the sixteen year old who became Voldemort, narrowly avoided being eaten by a basilisk by use of my wits, and you have the balls to chew me out for sarcastically calling you 'Dad'! Screw you and the entire god-damned Potter clan!" he stalked back toward the direction that they had come from.

"Y'know, Jimmy," he heard Sirius say sarcastically, "You really have a way with kids. Where can I learn to treat them like that? Oh, that's right – my own family!" Harry heard footsteps, and shortly was joined by Sirius. "He's not the guy I went to school with," he growled.

"Either that, or he's as good an actor as he constantly accuses me of being." Harry shrugged. "So he hates the fact that I exist. That's nothing new." They reached the stairs and let them carry the two of them up, where they were met by Lily, Peter, Ron and Ginny.

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Once everyone was top-side again, they walked to McGonagall's office, where they were met by the surprising image of Professor Dumbledore. "Please, come in and tell us what has happened. Is the problem solved?"

"Not quite," James Potter growled. "Evans here saw fit to let the basilisk live – and free it from its previous controls."

"It'll stay by itself," Harry said. "It wanted to be free of the controls that Slytherin and Riddle put on it."

"Hmm, this needs further explaining, I think. Minerva, would you see to Mr. Malfoy? I think he could stand to be in the hospital wing after such an ordeal." She nodded and left with Malfoy, who put up surprisingly little fight.

"So Tom Riddle was in fact in the diary?" Dumbledore asked when they were away.

“Yes sir. He'd originally gotten his hooks into Ginny, but she was strong enough to throw it away and tell us, which is when it got to you. Malfoy must have found a way to steal it from you, and from what Riddle told me, willingly agreed to whatever he needed to do in order to bring Voldemort to power.”

“Why would Riddle have cared?” Lily asked. Harry pulled his wand and did the same trick that Tom had done in the Chamber. Everyone's eyes went wide.

A loud whoop from the back of the room sounded, and they turned to see Peter jumping up and down. “That's our Harry!” he was crowing. “Faced Vol – Vold – Riddle twice so far, and beaten him both times! Yes!” Only James and Snape looked less than pleased at that exclamation.

“Quite true,” Dumbledore said. “Care to tell us the story?”

Harry grimaced. “Not really, but I will anyway.” He proceeded to tell them about everything, from the beginning, hearing the voices in the pipes, through Hermione's finally realising that the creature had to be a basilisk, up to driving the sword into the diary. “Thing seems to act as a wand,” he said, finally placing all three of the items on the desk – Sorting Hat, sword, and diary.

Dumbledore picked up the sword and his eyebrows rose. “Yes, I had heard that such was one of this sword's properties. If ever you had doubts as to which House you belong in, Harry, doubt no longer. Read the sword.” He handed it back to Harry

Harry was having trouble reading it for the ink covering the blade. He pulled his own wand and said “*Emundo sword!*” The thing was now the cleanest it had probably been in over a thousand years. He looked at it carefully – this was no ceremonial sword with frippery and such to make it look pretty, this was a sword that was intended for use. Harry was sure that it had tasted blood before, even if it hadn't today. Finally, carved on the hilt such that the writing was properly aligned when the point was skyward, Harry found two simple words.

GODRIC GRYFFINDOR

That was all he needed. "Jeez, I killed off a memory with an heirloom sword everyone's been trying to find for a thousand years?"

"Exactly, Harry. Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that sword from the Sorting Hat. In fact, I think we shall have to get you lessons in how to use it. It would be unlikely for it to suddenly appear just so you would be able to use it to kill a basilisk or stab a diary. And it has chosen you, or else it would not have come to you." Dumbledore grabbed the hat and put it on for a moment, and there was a sudden *CLONK* that sounded from the headmaster's head, which was followed immediately by a quiet "Ow," from the man. He reached up and pulled the hat off his head, and then handed Harry the scabbard that had just appeared. "The scabbard that went with it, I believe." Considering that it was encrusted with rubies as well, matching the sword, it was a safe bet. Sirius came over and helped Harry buckle the scabbard onto his belt, and the sword rejoined the scabbard for the first time in many years.

Dumbledore looked to the diary next and scowled. "The information that you have given me concerning the diary is disturbing, and tickles my memory about something. When I remember it, if it is important concerning Voldemort, rest assured that I shall tell you, Harry. We approach the day when I will tell you what I did not last year. I will warn you that this is likely not the last time you will face Voldemort. I would frankly be shocked if it were."

He clapped his hands once, dispelling the dark mood that had begun to descend on the room. "Well, I think that we should celebrate the end of the menace. Perhaps a feast would be in order?" He looked to assembled group. "Perhaps telling the kitchens of such? And letting the Houses know that the danger is now past? I would like to speak to the children alone for a moment, if I may." The room quickly emptied, and the three shrank slightly, worried about the incipient reprimand.

"I am sorry for making it seem that I am about to take you to task, but it was the only way to remove them from the room. To be honest, I am rather proud of the four of you. I include Miss Granger, of course. I wish that there were more I could do or say to show my gratitude to you, but what I can do is see to it that all four of you receive Special

Awards for Services to the School. Harry, for the courage and sheer cussedness it took, I award you two hundred and fifty points for facing down the basilisk and finding a way to avoid bloodshed.”

“Well, that makes up for the fifty that Professor Potter took for my insolence immediately following the incident down there.”

“And then some!” Ron said.

“Mr. Weasley. For your part in this, I award you and Miss Granger fifty points apiece.” He turned to face Ginny. “Miss Weasley. For your part in this -”

“I’ll go pack now sir,” she said softly. “This never would have happened if I hadn’t kept it to myself. Someone could have been killed.”

“Why ever would you wish to pack, Miss Weasley? You held your own, mentally, against a young man with great power for as long as you could, and later showed the mental fortitude to admit what had been happening and ask for help. That is, after all, why you are getting the Special Award. You are also receiving one hundred points for the reasons I just gave. You and your brother do your House proud, Miss Weasley – last year with your brother’s willingness to die for the right thing, this year with your incredible courage. I can honestly say that I am proud to know you, and I will say the same to your parents. You are a credit to the Weasley name.”

All that Ginny could do was to blink madly, trying very hard not to cry. Ron smiled at her and led her from the room. Harry grinned at the two of them and looked back at Dumbledore. “Thank you, sir. I think what you just said meant more to both of them than the points or the awards.” Harry got up and crossed to the door. He had just reached for the handle, however, when the door burst open so violently that it bounced back off the wall.

Lucius Malfoy stood there, fury in his face. And cowering behind his legs, heavily wrapped in bandages, was Dobby. “Good evening, Lucius,” said Dumbledore pleasantly.

Mr. Malfoy almost knocked Harry over as he swept into the room. Dobby went scurrying in after him, crouching at the hem of his cloak, a look of abject terror on his face. The elf was carrying a stained rag with which he was attempting to finish cleaning Mr. Malfoys shoes. Apparently Mr. Malfoy had set out in a great hurry, for not only were his shoes half-polished, but his usually sleek hair was disheveled. Ignoring the elf bobbing apologetically around his ankles, he fixed his cold eyes upon Dumbledore.

"So!" he said "You've come back. The governors suspended you, but you still saw fit to return to Hogwarts."

"Well, you see, Lucius," said Dumbledore, smiling serenely, "the other eleven governors contacted me today. It was something like being caught in a hailstorm of owls, to tell the truth."

"That would hurt," Harry muttered to himself, or so he thought.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said with a chuckle. "It seems that they had heard that one of the students had been killed, and they wanted me back here at once. They seemed to think I was the best man for the job after all. Very strange tales they told me, too ... it seems that several of them were under the impression that you had threatened to curse their families if they didn't agree to suspend me in the first place."

Mr. Malfoy went even paler than usual, but his eyes were still slits of fury. "So – have you stopped the attacks yet?" he sneered. "Have you caught the culprit?"

"We have," said Dumbledore, with a smile.

"Well?" said Mr. Malfoy sharply. "Who is it?"

"The same person as last time, Lucius," said Dumbledore. "But this time, Lord Voldemort was acting through somebody else. By means of this diary."

He held up the small black book with the large hole through the centre, watching Mr. Malfoy closely. Harry, however, was watching Dobby.

The elf was doing something very odd. His great eyes fixed meaningfully on Harry, he kept pointing at the diary, then at Mr. Malfoy, and then hitting himself hard on the head with his fist.

"I see ..." said Mr. Malfoy slowly to Dumbledore.

"Unfortunately, I got there in time to save your son from having his life force sucked out by Tom Riddle. Interesting that the diary that you planted in Ginny Weasley's things this summer almost killed your son, isn't it? All because your son was too nosey to let Ginny have the diary back. And then he just agreed without thinking to let the little idiot in the diary do anything he wanted."

Lucius Malfoy's face was white, his lips taut – he looked somewhere between a faint and apoplexy. "You have no proof that I did any such thing as you suggest."

"Oh, no one will be able to do that," said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry. "Not now that Riddle has vanished from the book. On the other hand, I would advise you, Lucius, not to go giving out any more of Lord Voldemort's old school things. If any more of them find their way into innocent hands, I think Arthur Weasley, for one, will make sure they are traced back to you ..."

Lucius Malfoy stood for a moment, and Harry distinctly saw his right hand twitch as though he was longing to reach for his wand. Instead, he turned to his house-elf.

"We're going, Dobby!"

He wrenched open the door and as the elf came hurrying up to him, he kicked him right through it. They could hear Dobby squealing with pain all the way along the corridor. Harry stood for a moment, thinking hard. Then it came to him -

"Professor Dumbledore," he said hurriedly. "Can I give that diary back to Mr. Malfoy, please?"

"Certainly, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly. "But hurry. The feast, remember ..."

Harry grabbed the diary and dashed out of the office. He could hear Dobby's squeals of pain receding around the corner. Quickly, wondering if this plan could possibly work, Harry took off one of his shoes, pulled off his grungy sock, and stuffed the diary into it. Then he ran down the dark corridor.

He caught up with them at the top of the stairs. "Mr. Malfoy," he gasped, skidding to a halt, "I've got something for you -"

And he forced the smelly sock into Lucius Malfoy's hand. "What the - ?"

Mr. Malfoy ripped the sock off the diary, threw it aside, then looked furiously from the ruined book to Harry. "You'll meet the sticky end you were meant to one day, Harry Potter," he said softly, throwing the ruined diary at Harry's feet.

"How could you say that to me, Daddy?" Harry mocked. "After all, it's likely that you're my father."

Lucius snarled, his hand twitching toward his wand, but instead, he turned to go. "I will be there when you meet that end, Potter. Count on it. Come, Dobby. I said, come."

But Dobby didn't move. He was holding up Harry's disgusting, slimy sock, and looking at it as though it were a priceless treasure. "Master has given a sock," said the elf in wonderment. "Master gave it to Dobby."

"What's that?" spat Mr. Malfoy. "What did you say?"

"Got a sock," said Dobby in disbelief. "Master threw it, and Dobby caught it, and Dobby -- Dobby is free."

Lucius Malfoy stood frozen, staring at the elf. Then he lunged at Harry. "You've lost me my servant, boy!"

But Dobby shouted, "You shall not harm Harry Potter!" There was a loud bang, and Mr. Malfoy was thrown backward. He crashed down the stairs, three at a time, landing in a crumpled heap on the landing

below. He got up, his face livid, and pulled out his wand, but Dobby raised a long, threatening finger.

"You shall go now," he said fiercely, pointing down at Mr. Malfoy. "You shall not touch Harry Potter. You shall go now."

Lucius Malfoy had no choice. With a last, incensed stare at the pair of them, he swung his cloak around him and hurried out of sight.

"Harry Potter freed Dobby!" said the elf shrilly, gazing up at Harry, moonlight from the nearest window reflected in his orb-like eyes. "Harry Potter set Dobby free!"

"Least I could do, Dobby," said Harry, grinning. "Just promise never to try and save my life again."

The elf's ugly brown face split suddenly into a wide, toothy smile.

"I've just got one question, Dobby," said Harry as Dobby pulled on Harry's sock with shaking hands. "You told me all this had nothing to do with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, remember? Well -- "

"It was a clue, sir," said Dobby, his eyes widening, as though this was obvious. "Was giving you a clue. The Dark Lord, before he changed his name, could be freely named, you see?"

"Right," said Harry weakly. "Well, I'd better go. There's a feast, and my friend Hermione should be awake by now..."

Dobby threw his arms around Harry's middle and hugged him.

"Harry Potter is greater by far than Dobby knew!" he sobbed. "Farewell, Harry Potter!"

And with a final loud crack, Dobby disappeared.

"It's Evans, Dobby," he said resignedly to the empty air before turning to head to the feast. "I expect it from the Malfoys, but ..."

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Harry had been to several Hogwarts feasts, but never one quite like this. Everybody was in their pajamas, and the celebration lasted all night. There were many high points, such as Justin coming over to him and apologising profusely for ever doubting him (the look in the Hufflepuff's eyes spoke volumes for his sincerity); the Gryffindor reaction at discovering the net gain of four hundred points in one day securing the House Cup for the second year in a row; Ginny coming over to hug him (once again making him appreciate the fact that she seemed to be growing up a little faster than other girls her age – she stayed with him until the reaction subsided); McGonagall announcing that the exams would be cancelled, save the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. Exams (“Hermione will go spare when she hears that,” Ron had said); but he thought his favourite was Hermione rushing in and tackling him with a huge hug, screaming “You did it! You did it!” Her eyes widened when she felt the reaction she'd caused in him, and then she developed a sly smile. “We'll definitely be having that conversation between the four of us this summer,” she said. She kissed him on the cheek and added, “Thanks for the compliment.”

The rest of the final term passed in a haze of blazing sunshine. Hogwarts was back to normal with only a few, small differences, the most notable being that Lucius Malfoy had been sacked as a school governor. Draco was no longer strutting around the school as though he owned the place. On the contrary, he looked resentful and sulky. On the other hand, Ginny Weasley was perfectly happy again, and enjoying tormenting her boyfriend with the way she could make him react. All in all, it was an enjoyable end of term and end of a school year.

Chapter 9

Harry grinned as he watched everyone aboard the train. This had been an interesting summer so far, both good and bad. Even with the Death Eaters starting to make an appearance in the world again, the good far outweighed the bad.

They'd had the great fortune to get tickets for the Quidditch World Cup, in one of the best possible seats – right next to the Minister's box. Well, they would have been excellent seats if not for the appearance of the Malfoys. Sirius had taken great pleasure in publicly calling Draco's mother 'Cissy'; while every time that Draco made a snide comment, Harry called him 'brother'. The reference was not lost on any of the Malfoys, and surprisingly, even Cornelius Fudge had seemed to understand the intimation Harry was making.

"What are you thinking about?" Hermione asked him. "You're smiling about something."

"Just remembering this summer," came the reply. "The look on Fudge's face when he realised that I was calling one of the biggest contributors to his campaign a Death Eater. I don't think that man likes me, you know?"

"You're probably right," Ginny said, entering the car. "More fool him, then. Can't see what a wonderful man you are." She walked over and sat on his lap, kissing him soundly. When she broke finally, she smirked and asked, "So, have you come to a decision as to which of us is the better kisser?"

Harry grinned widely as he caught his breath. "I'm still not sure. This is going to take a lot more study, you know."

Hermione looked up at him. "Proper scientific study of anything can take years, after all, Ginny. And are you really complaining about kissing him?" Her eyes twinkled.

"Hey, none of that twinkling," Ron said with a laugh. "You're already lucky enough to be dating two incredibly manly men – no practising

bewitching more!" He hugged her. "How did you manage to convince the both of us ... heck, all four of us ..."

She went quite serious. "Honestly, Ron, it's because ... well, I don't know how ... oh, how do I say it?" She began to fret.

"You have the same problem that I do," Harry said, "just with the opposite gender. I happen to fancy both you and Ginny, and you can't decide between Ron and me. Finding Ginny attractive too is just a bonus, I'd imagine."

Hermione's face went white. "How did you ... when -"

"One night during the summer. Got up for the loo. Heard some interesting noises and a softly sighed, 'Oh, Ginny' from inside the room." He shrugged. "Are you two happy?" Hermione nodded, obviously still worried, while Ginny giggled and nodded exuberantly. "Then enjoy."

"It doesn't bother you?" Hermione asked.

"Do you want it to?" he laughed. "I'm not one of those stupid Muggle religious nuts you read about. If it makes you happy, then it's good. Besides, I'm a guy. We guys are supposed to enjoy watching that sort of thing, too." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, the grin still on his face. Both girls laughed, and Hermione got up and sat on his lap after Ginny had moved aside. Her kiss also left him breathless. "Yep," he sighed. "Probably take years to decide."

"Harry, your parents work at the school – d'you have any idea what Charlie and Percy were nattering about?" Ron asked in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"No, although Mum and Sirius had a certain air about them, although that may have just been the delirium of being newly-weds." He laughed. "I've taken to calling Sirius 'Dadfoot'."

"They're still acting like they're just married?" Hermione asked with a happy sniff. "That happened last year, just before we started third year! Well, second for Ginny."

"They are so much in love, it's crazy," Harry said. "I guess that day just before we stopped the basilisk, when I caught Mum in his robe, in his quarters – well, when I didn't have a hissy-fit about it, I guess they realised that I was alright with it. So they made the preparations, and now they've been married for a year." He smiled somewhat sadly. "It's nice having a man around the house who cares for me as a dad, y'know?"

"I'm just sorry it took until you were thirteen," Ginny said.

Harry simply shrugged. "As far as what's coming, all I know is that it was what made the Headmaster so distracted last year. The Ministry is involved, which is why Bagman and Crouch and Percy and your father are aware of it."

They were going to speak a little further, but they could hear voices from down the hall through their open compartment door.

"... Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts, you know. He knows the headmaster, you see. Well, you know his opinion of Dumbledore – the man's such a Mudblood-lover – and Durmstrang doesn't admit that sort of riffraff. But Mother didn't like the idea of me going to school so far away. Father says Durmstrang takes a far more sensible line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually learn them, not just the defense rubbish we do ..."

Hermione got up, tiptoed to the compartment door, and slid it shut, blocking out Malfoy's voice.

"I can see who wears the pants in that family," she said. "His mother kept him from going where he could learn to follow in Daddy's footsteps?" She shook her head. "Maybe we should point that out to him. 'You learn those Dark Arts, we'll learn to stop them, and then we'll fight and wipe the floor with you.' What do you think?" She was answered by huge grins from the other three.

Several of their friends looked in on them as the afternoon progressed, including Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom. Seamus was still wearing his Ireland rosette. Some of its magic seemed to be wearing off now; it was still squeaking "Troy –

Mullet – Moran!" but in a very feeble and exhausted sort of way. After half an hour or so, Hermione, growing tired of the endless Quidditch talk, buried herself once more in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, and started trying to learn a Summoning Charm.

Neville listened jealously to the others' conversation as they relived the Cup match.

"Gran didn't want to go," he said miserably. "Wouldn't buy tickets. It sounded amazing though."

"It was," said Ron. "Look at this, Neville ..."

He rummaged in his trunk up in the luggage rack and pulled out the miniature figure of Viktor Krum.

"Oh wow," said Neville enviously as Ron tipped Krum onto his hand.

"We saw him right up close, as well," said Ron. "We were in the Top Box -"

"For the first and last time in your life, Weasley."

Draco Malfoy had appeared in the doorway. Behind him stood Crabbe and Goyle, his enormous, thuggish cronies, both of whom appeared to have grown at least a foot during the summer. Evidently they had overheard the conversation through the compartment door, which Dean and Seamus had left ajar.

"Don't remember asking you to join us, Malfoy," said Harry coolly.

"Weasley ... what is that?" said Malfoy, ignoring Harry while pointing at Pigwidgeon's cage. A sleeve of Ron's dress robes was dangling from it, swaying with the motion of the train, the moldy lace cuff very obvious.

Hermione stood up, interrupting Ron's half-formed plan for stuffing the second-hand dress robes out of sight. She walked over to the cage and made a grand presentation out of studying it. She turned back to Malfoy and spoke as if to a slow five year-old. "This is an owl, Malfoy. Member of the avian family. Typically used by the wizarding

population to deliver post." She paused and cocked her head before finishing in a soft, kind voice. "Did you understand all of that, or should I try again with shorter words?"

The others were snickering through their hands while Malfoy turned a particularly unbecoming shade of puce. "Shut it, Mudblood. I was talking about that sleeve over there. Well, when you have no money, you must make due, I suppose."

"And when you have no love, you use money to pretend," Harry said in reply, sounding bored.

Draco turned puce again, but actually ignored Harry's comment for once. "So ... going to enter, Weasley? Going to try and bring a bit of glory to the family name? There's money involved as well, you know ... you'd be able to afford some decent robes if you won ..."

"What are you talking about?" snapped Ron.

"Are you going to enter?" Malfoy repeated. "I suppose you will, Potter? You never miss a chance to show off, do you?"

"Either explain what you're on about or go away, Malfoy," said Hermione testily, toying with the end of her wand.

A gleeful smile spread across Malfoy's pale face. "Don't tell me you don't know?" he said delightedly. "You've got a father and brother at the Ministry and you don't even know? My God, my father told me about it ages ago ... heard it from Cornelius Fudge. But then, Father's always associated with the top people at the Ministry ... maybe your father's too junior to know about it, Weasley ... yes ... they probably don't talk about important stuff in front of him ..."

Hermione spoke up, "Or, more likely, Mister Weasley takes his secrecy oath more seriously than your father does, Malfoy." She turned to Harry and continued, "It certainly appears that Arthur Weasley does more to maintain his family name and honour than Lucius Malfoy, doesn't it?"

"I've had it with you, Mudblood! What would you understand about honour? *Morsus!*" An ugly reddish beam erupted from Draco's wand

and impacted Hermione, who screamed and writhed as if a million insects were tormenting her. The spell didn't last long, however, as Malfoy was quickly dragged into the room by Harry, who punched Malfoy in the face, breaking his nose and removing several teeth. He continued to punch Draco, rendering the boy unconscious, but he didn't stop punching at Malfoy until the combined strength of Seamus, Dean, Neville and Ron pulled him off. Crabbe and Goyle dragged the unconscious and bleeding blonde from the room. Harry was still fighting to get free, but finally calmed down when a shaky Hermione came over and told him that she was alright. "I'm really fine, Harry. It hurt like the dickens, but you made him stop it, and I'm fine now."

They settled in and listened to the weather getting worse. As the train pulled into the station, they heard a crack overhead, and then the sound as if they had parked beneath a waterfall. Harry looked at the people in the car and cast *Impervius* on each of his friends and himself, and they left the safety of the train.

It not only sounded like it when they were on the train, but it also looked like they had moved underneath a waterfall when they exited. Sheets of water as far as they could see, which admittedly was not very far. "Hey Ron," he said after Seamus, Dean and Neville had split off to meet up with a couple of the other girls, "what do you think of my cancelling the *Impervius* on the girls?"

With Ginny and Hermione looking daggers at Harry, Ron said, "Is it really worth the slow and painful death they'd give you to see them with their clothes plastered to their bodies?"

Harry looked at both of the girls for a moment before answering, "Hell yeah!" in an exuberant tone. "I remember this summer when they put on T-shirts right after climbing from the pool. Yow!"

The girls shook their heads in amusement before each kissed a cheek. "Thank you, Harry," Ginny said. "I know I'm not as sexy as Hermione, but -"

"Says who?" Harry asked. "I'll kill 'em!"

"Says me," Ginny answered. "I mean, look at her. Great boobs, great butt, and then there's me, the toothpick."

"And what happens when you sit on my lap?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows. She blushed prettily. "Exactly. So do go on telling me that I don't find you sexy." He hugged her tightly.

The hug was broken when an arm grabbed him roughly and yanked him, which made Ginny fall to the floor painfully. Harry turned swinging, and caught Professor Snape in the nose.

"You'll be expelled for this!" Snape yelled, sounding happy about the prospect. "Come with me." He started to pull on Harry's arm, but Harry resisted. Before anyone could say anything, Snape yelled "*Stupefy!*", and the world went black for Harry.

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He awoke in the side room to the Great Hall, an argument happening between teachers. "I want that boy expelled!" Snape was yelling.

"I want you dead!" Sirius bellowed back. "We can't always get what we want, can we?"

"What's going on?" Harry asked. "I was hugging Ginny, and all of a sudden he grabs me and yanks my arm. How's Ginny, by the way?"

"Just hurt her pride," Sirius said. "You can kiss it and make it better later," he finished with a leer.

"That will be difficult, mongrel, with his no longer being a student at this school."

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"After your unwarranted attack on Draco Malfoy, you have the nerve to ask that, Potter?" Snape sneered.

"Ever since Sirius and Mum got married, it's been Black. Even if it weren't Black, it would be Evans. And as for unwarranted, who vouched for that? Crabbe and Goyle?"

"Of course. You know that they're always with him," Snape replied. Grinning, he finished in a smarmy voice, "In other words, there were witnesses."

"I assume you are aware that there are also other witnesses, such as Seamus Finnegan, Dean Thomas, Neville Longbottom, Ron and Ginny Weasley, and the person who led to me pounding on Draco, Hermione Granger."

Minerva McGonagall sighed. "We have no choice then, if you admit to striking Malfoy. We must expel you."

Harry's face shut down. "Very well, since the actual facts don't matter, only the word of two Slytherins, I'll get my stuff and leave." He was on his feet and out the door into the Great Hall before any of the teachers could even react.

"Evans! Stop!" McGonagall bellowed the length of the hall.

"I'm not a student any longer, professor," he replied as he kept walking. "What are you going to do, take points?"

"You're expelled?" Hermione gasped. "Why?"

"Because I defended you against Malfoy." He kissed her softly. "I love you. I'll see you in the summer." He continued toward the door.

"Say what?" Dean Thomas shouted, loud enough that it echoed through the entire hall. "Malfoy casts *Morsus* on Hermione, and *Harry's* the one getting expelled? To hell with this school, then!" As Harry reached the doors, he was surprised to hear the sound of an entire table rising to their feet. He turned to see the entirety of the Gryffindor contingent of the school standing and walking toward him. "I don't know about the rest," Dean said, "but if they'll accept the word of three people known to be cheating, conniving, lying bastards over the word of someone who has proven himself to be truthful ... well, I don't want to be here any more."

"Congratulation, Minnie," James Potter was heard to say. "You know he's a drama queen, and you managed to lose an entire House –

yours." A loud slap followed it, and Lily walked toward Harry, rubbing her hand, Sirius beside her.

"Can we go somewhere and talk about this, Harry?" she asked.

"You heard her. I admitted to hitting Malfoy, and she didn't ask if there was provocation or not – she simply stated that I would have to be expelled. I'm not worried about humiliating any of the teachers, because I was awakened in that room so that I could be humiliated by being expelled publicly. So I'm leaving." He hugged her quickly. "I'm sorry, Mum. You and Dad always taught me to do the right thing, so I am." He turned to Sirius. "Right, Dad?"

Sirius shook his head. "I was getting to like this job, too." He turned. "Albus? I'll give you my letter soon. I've got a son to keep an eye on."

"Some very large assumptions are being made," the Headmaster said. "The greatest being that young Harry will actually be expelled without a chance to tell his side of the story. Since the actions in the side room caused it to spill into the public arena, it may as well play itself out in the public arena." He looked to Harry. "You are aware that Mr. Malfoy was almost sent to St. Mungo's?"

Harry answered by shrugging. "Don't really care. We were minding our business when Malfoy decided to come by and do his usual taunts. I responded as I always do – insult him back. Sort of like Muggle tennis or volleyball, volleying for serve." He got a number of blank looks. "Never mind. Well, Ron and Hermione were involved in the verbal sparring, and then Malfoy commented on whatever is happening here this year, asking us if we would be entering."

"Did he say what it was you would be entering?"

"No, he was just lording over us that he knew something we didn't, because his father is in tight with the Minister. He made a comment that Ron and Ginny didn't know because Mr. Weasley isn't as well placed in the Ministry, and Hermione answered with what the four of us believe – that Mr. Weasley actually considers his oath to mean something." He shrugged. "Can't say it surprises me. Lucius Malfoy is a Death Eater, after all."

"He was acquitted," Snape growled. "He was under the *Imperius*."

"So he was under the *Imperius* again at the end of my second year, when he found out about that diary? We know where it came from, we just can't prove it to a court's satisfaction. Anyway, when Hermione made the comment about security oaths and family honour, Draco said that he'd had enough of her, and cast *Morsus* on her. I proceeded to drag him into the room and thrash him soundly. That's pretty much it, and I'll submit to whatever tests that you want to prove my side of the story."

"You did go over the top on striking Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore said.

"At the time, he'd been hurting my girlfriend. Well, one of them. He'd been hurting her, and I wasn't going to stand for it. He made me angry. Cast all the spells you want at me, but hurt one of my friends or loved one and it may be the last thing you ever do." He looked toward the Slytherin table and met the eyes of an angrily staring Pansy Parkinson.

"Are threats really necessary?" McGonagall asked.

Harry turned to face her, and watched her come to a realisation. "I'm not threatening. I'm used to being the target simply because Professor Potter's family worked so hard to make everyone aware that I'm not a Potter. On the other hand, I won't stand by and let people go after those that I care for. No threat – a promise."

"You aren't helping your case any, Mr. Black," Albus said kindly.

"Who needs to? The Deputy Headmistress informed me that I was no longer a student, that I must be expelled."

"Luckily, she does not make the final decision," Dumbledore answered. "We shall continue this after the feast, but your willingness to subject yourself to methods of finding the truth does you credit. Now, after this delightful show of solidarity, could all the students please return to their seats?" Harry was intrigued to see students from other Houses sitting as well. The Headmaster ascended to the head table and said, "Now that the entertainment portion of the

evening is complete, perhaps we can set to the Sorting and then to our meals."

The Sorting went as expected, and the meal also. Sir Nicholas talked during the meal about a ruckus that had occurred in the kitchens, caused by Peeves, that had almost made the meal late, but the house elves had rallied mightily and ejected him and completed the preparations. Hermione merely chuckled at the thought of all the house elves ejecting Peeves from the kitchens.

"What are you laughing about?" Harry asked.

"Just the image of the elves fighting off Peeves. Had this image of house elves in military garb brandishing house elf sized sword and squeaking 'Charge!'" This imagery caused most everyone around her to start laughing as well.

The meal finally ended, and the Headmaster stood, a smile on his face. "So! Now that we are all fed and watered, I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices."

"Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include Screaming Yo-yos, Fanged Frisbees, and Ever-Bashing Boomerangs. The full list comprises some four hundred and thirty-seven items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr. Filch's office, if anybody would like to check it."

The corners of Dumbledore's mouth twitched. He continued, "As ever, I would like to remind you all that the forest on the grounds is out-of-bounds to students, as is the village of Hogsmeade to all below third year.

"It is also my painful duty to inform you that the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year."

"What?" Harry gasped. He looked around at Fred and George, his fellow members of the Quidditch team. They were mouthing soundlessly at Dumbledore, apparently too appalled to speak. Dumbledore went on, "This is due to an event that will be starting in October, and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much

of the teachers' time and energy – but I am sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts, we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year."

"You're joking!" said Fred Weasley loudly

"I am not joking, Mr. Weasley," he said, "though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar." Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly. "Er – but maybe this is not the time ... no ..." said Dumbledore, "where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament ... well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who do know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely."

"The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities – until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued."

"Death toll?" Hermione whispered, looking alarmed. But her anxiety did not seem to be shared by the majority of students in the Hall; many of them were whispering excitedly to one another, and Harry himself was far more interested in hearing about the tournament than in worrying about deaths that had happened hundreds of years ago.

"There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament," Dumbledore continued, "none of which has been very successful. However, our own departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to

ensure that this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger.

"The heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their short-listed contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand Galleons personal prize money."

"I'm going for it!" Fred Weasley hissed down the table, his face lit with enthusiasm at the prospect of such glory and riches. He was not the only person who seemed to be visualizing himself as the Hogwarts champion. At every House table, Harry could see people either gazing raptly at Dumbledore, or else whispering fervently to their neighbors. But then Dumbledore spoke again, and the Hall quieted once more.

"Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts," he said, "the heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age – that is to say, seventeen years or older – will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. This" – Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people had made noises of outrage at these words, and the Weasley twins were suddenly looking furious – "is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take, and it is highly unlikely that students below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them Hogwarts champion." His light blue eyes twinkled as they flickered over Fred's and George's mutinous faces. "I therefore beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen."

"The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving in October and remaining with us for the greater part of this year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us, and will give your whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion when he or she is selected. And now, it is late, and I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested as you

enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!" There was a great scraping and banging as all the students got to their feet and swarmed toward the double doors into the entrance hall.

"They can't do that!" said George Weasley, who had not joined the crowd moving toward the door, but was standing up and glaring at Dumbledore. "We're seventeen in April, why can't we have a shot?"

"They're not stopping me entering," said Fred stubbornly, also scowling at the top table. "The champions'll get to do all sorts of stuff you'd never be allowed to do normally. And a thousand Galleons prize money!"

"Yeah," said Ron, a faraway look on his face. "Yeah, a thousand Galleons ..."

"Come on," said Hermione, "we'll be the only ones left here if you don't move."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George set off for the entrance hall, Fred and George debating the ways in which Dumbledore might stop those who were under seventeen from entering the tournament.

"Who's this impartial judge who's going to decide who the champions are?" said Harry.

"Dunno," said Fred, "but it's them we'll have to fool. I reckon a couple of drops of Aging Potion might do it, George ..."

"Dumbledore knows you're not of age, though," said Ron.

"Yeah, but he's not the one who decides who the champion is, is he?" said Fred shrewdly. "Sounds to me like once this judge knows who wants to enter, he'll choose the best from each school and never mind how old they are. Dumbledore's trying to stop us giving our names."

"People have died, though!" said Hermione in a worried voice as they walked through a door concealed behind a tapestry and started up another, narrower staircase.

"Yeah," said Fred airily, "but that was years ago, wasn't it? Anyway, where's the fun without a bit of risk? Hey, Ron, what if we find out how to get 'round Dumbledore? Fancy entering?"

"What d'you reckon?" Ron asked Harry. "Be cool to enter, wouldn't it? But I suppose they might want someone older ... dunno if we've learned enough ..."

"I definitely haven't," came Neville's gloomy voice from behind Fred and George.

"I expect my gran'd want me to try, though. She's always going on about how I should be upholding the family honour. I'll just have to – oops ..."

Neville's foot had sunk right through a step halfway up the staircase. There were many of these trick stairs at Hogwarts; it was second nature to most of the older students to jump this particular step, but Neville had been so into the conversation that he had forgotten. Harry and Ron seized him under the armpits and pulled him out, while a suit of armour at the top of the stairs creaked and clanked, laughing wheezily.

"Shut it, you," said Ron, banging down its visor hard as they passed.

They made their way up to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, which was concealed behind a large portrait of a fat lady in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said as they approached.

"Balderdash," said George, "a prefect downstairs told me."

The portrait swung forward to reveal a hole in the wall through which they all climbed. A crackling fire warmed the circular common room, which was full of squashy armchairs and tables. "How about you, Harry?" asked the twins. "Would you join?"

"Why? I've no need for the money, now that Sirius is adopting me as the Black family heir. And facing down Voldemort in my first year and a basilisk in my second? No thank you on the danger. I'd be insane to put my name in that competition." He turned to Ginny. "They told me

that you hurt your pride when Snape grabbed me. Sirius suggested I kiss it and make it feel better. What d'you think?"

Ginny blushed furiously and said, "Don't start something you're not willing to finish, Mr. Black."

Sienna grumbled. "I was hoping to learn something," she said with a mock pout. Her brother James merely shook his head and headed up the stairs to his dormitory room.

Harry thought for a moment before saying, "True, milady. I don't know if I am quite ready for that yet, as much as the thought is a nice one." He noticed the sad look that Neville had on his face as he looked at the interplay. "What say we all get to bed, and I'll find out in the morning what they have planned for me for trying to kill Malfoy."

"Would you have really killed him?" Hermione asked.

"He was hurting you," he replied, shrugging. "That spell is not much below the Cruciatus – it's a very dark spell." He bit his lip. "I'll admit that I wouldn't have been trying to kill him if he were attacking any of the guys. Unconsciousness would have been enough. But either of my girlfriends?" He looked. "To be honest, I think the real reason that Ron and Neville were working so hard to yank me off Malfoy wasn't to keep me out of trouble, but because they wanted a crack at him too." ("Too right," grumbled Ron, while Neville nodded vociferously, his eyes unconsciously flickering to Ginny.)

"Well, that's neither here nor there. I find out tomorrow if I'm defanging Frisbees with Filch for a month, or whether it all blows over. Time for bed for me." He yawned and stood, pulling the two girls into hugs before going upstairs.

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The next month and a half settled into the routine that they were all used to, with homework taking up a huge amount of their time. Harry had refused Divinations and had settled instead for Ancient Runes and was learning quite a bit. Of course, having Hermione offer him a kiss for every right answer did tend to give him impetus to do properly on his homework.

One day, as he arrived at the entrance hall from their lesson in Care of Magical Creatures, they found their way blocked by what seemed to be every student at the school. After some judicious moving of their fellow students, they finally came to a large board with the following announcement:

TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

THE DELEGATIONS FROM BEAUXBATONS AND DURMSTRANG WILL BE ARRIVING AT 6 O'CLOCK ON FRIDAY THE 30TH OF OCTOBER. LESSONS WILL END HALF AN HOUR EARLY.

STUDENTS WILL RETURN THEIR BAGS AND BOOKS TO THEIR DORMITORIES AND ASSEMBLE IN FRONT OF THE CASTLE TO GREET OUR GUESTS BEFORE THE WELCOMING FEAST.

"Only a week away!" said Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff, emerging from the crowd, his eyes gleaming. "I wonder if Cedric knows? Think I'll go and tell him..."

"Cedric?" said Ron blankly as Ernie hurried off.

"Diggory," said Harry. "He must be entering the tournament."

"Either that or his classmates think that he should and want to tell him so," Hermione said. Harry nodded to that assessment.

The next week involved more scrubbing and cleaning than anyone had ever seen at Hogwarts at one time. Several grimy portraits had been scrubbed, much to the displeasure of their subjects, who sat huddled in their frames muttering darkly and wincing as they felt their raw pink faces. The suits of armour were suddenly gleaming and moving without squeaking, and Argus Filch, the caretaker, was behaving so ferociously to any students who forgot to wipe their shoes that he terrified a pair of first-year girls into hysterics.

When they went down to breakfast on the morning of the thirtieth of October, they found that the Great Hall had been decorated overnight. Enormous silk banners hung from the walls, each of them representing a Hogwarts House: red with a gold lion for Gryffindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw, yellow with a black badger

for Hufflepuff, and green with a silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teachers' table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms: lion, eagle, badger, and snake united around a large letter H. The Quartet (as they had taken to being called once Ginny joined them) all sat down, near Fred and George. "You two got any ideas on the Triwizard Tournament yet?" Harry asked. "Thought any more about trying to enter?"

"I asked McGonagall how the champions are chosen but she wasn't telling," said George bitterly. "She just told me to shut up and get on with transfiguring my raccoon."

"Wonder what the tasks are going to be?" said Ron thoughtfully. "You know, I bet we could do them, Harry. We've done dangerous stuff before ..."

"Not in front of a panel of judges, you haven't," said Fred. "McGonagall says the champions get awarded points according to how well they've done the tasks."

"Who are the judges?" Harry asked.

"Well, the Heads of the participating schools are always on the panel," said Hermione, and everyone looked around at her, rather surprised, "because all three of them were injured during the Tournament of 1792, when a cockatrice the champions were supposed to be catching went on the rampage." Her eyes twinkled at Ron and Harry. "Do you really need to ask which book I got it out of?"

"Hogwarts: A History!" rebounded off the walls from the Weasleys plus Harry. Hermione joined their laughter.

"I am pleased to hear you in good spirits," came the brogue of Professor McGonagall. She looked to Harry and flushed very slightly. "Especially after the start of term."

"You've apologised for jumping to a conclusion, ma'am. It's not like I didn't go overboard on my ... ahem ... 'chastisement' of Draco. He just made me so angry that ... well, I lost it."

She nodded. "Even so, I will endeavour to do better. In return, I ask the same of you."

He grinned. "In an attempt to sound far more adult than I actually am, I will respond by saying that that's really all any of us can do. Try."

One of McGonagall's rare smiles briefly lit her face. "Indeed, Mr. Potter. Apologies. Mr Black." She bustled away to be ready for her first class.

There was a pleasant feeling of anticipation in the air that day. Nobody was very attentive in lessons, being much more interested in the arrival that evening of the people from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. When the bell rang early, Harry, Ron, and Hermione hurried up to Gryffindor Tower, deposited their bags and books as they had been instructed, pulled on their cloaks, and rushed back downstairs into the entrance hall.

The Heads of Houses were ordering their students into lines. "Weasley, straighten your hat," Professor McGonagall snapped at Ron. "Miss Patil, take that ridiculous thing out of your hair."

Parvati scowled. "Respectfully ma'am, but no. We are attempting to make a good impression on our visitors, and I've been told that this butterfly ornament is also a good luck charm. It's not so big as to block other students vision." She steeled her gaze, but Harry could see her shivering at having talked back to their head of House.

McGonagall stared for a moment, and Harry reached out to pat Parvati's hand, but she grasped it tightly in fear. "Very well, Miss Patil. You are correct. You may keep it." Parvati released Harry's hand and smiled at him, mouthing 'Thank you' to him.

"Follow me, please," said Professor McGonagall. "First years in front ... no pushing ..."

"Adding to your harem?" Ginny asked with a small grin. She looked slightly off, however. Before he could answer, however, they were silenced with a glance from McGonagall.

They filed down the steps and lined up in front of the castle. It was a cold, clear evening; dusk was falling and a pale, transparent-looking moon was already shining over the Forbidden Forest. Harry, standing between Ron and Hermione in the fourth row from the front, saw Dennis Creevey positively shivering with anticipation among the other first years.

They scanned the darkening grounds excitedly, but nothing was moving; everything was still, silent, and quite as usual. Harry was starting to feel cold. He wished they'd hurry up ... maybe the foreign students were preparing a dramatic entrance.

And then Dumbledore called out from the back row where he stood with the other teachers, "Aha! Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!"

"Where?" said many students eagerly, all looking in different directions.

"There!" yelled a sixth year, pointing over the forest.

Something large, much larger than a broomstick – or, indeed, a hundred broomsticks – was hurtling across the deep blue sky toward the castle, growing larger all the time.

"It's a dragon!" shrieked one of the first years, losing her head completely.

"Don't be stupid ... it's a flying house!" said Dennis Creevey.

Dennis's guess was closer ... As the gigantic black shape skimmed over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest and the lights shining from the castle windows hit it, they saw a gigantic, powder blue, horse-drawn carriage, the size of a large house, soaring toward them, pulled through the air by a dozen winged horses, all palominos, and each the size of an elephant.

The front three rows of students drew backward as the carriage hurtled ever lower, coming in to land at a tremendous speed – then, with an almighty crash that made Neville jump backward onto a Slytherin fifth year's foot, the horses' hooves, larger than dinner

plates, hit the ground. A second later, the carriage landed too, bouncing upon its vast wheels, while the golden horses tossed their enormous heads and rolled large, fiery red eyes.

Harry just had time to see that the door of the carriage bore a coat of arms (two crossed, golden wands, each emitting three stars) before it opened.

A boy in pale blue robes jumped down from the carriage, bent forward, fumbled for a moment with something on the carriage floor, and unfolded a set of golden steps. He sprang back respectfully. Then Harry saw a shining, high-heeled black shoe emerging from the inside of the carriage – a shoe the size of a child's sled – followed, almost immediately, by the largest woman he had ever seen in his life. The size of the carriage, and of the horses, was immediately explained. A few people gasped.

Harry had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid; he doubted whether there was an inch difference in their heights. Yet somehow – maybe simply because he was used to Hagrid – this woman (now at the foot of the steps, and looking around at the waiting, wide-eyed crowd) seemed even more unnaturally large. As she stepped into the light flooding from the entrance hall, she was revealed to have a handsome, olive-skinned face; large, black, liquid-looking eyes; and a rather beaky nose. Her hair was drawn back in a shining knob at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to foot in black satin, and many magnificent opals gleamed at her throat and on her thick fingers.

Dumbledore started to clap; the students, following his lead, broke into applause too, many of them standing on tiptoe, the better to look at this woman.

Her face relaxed into a gracious smile and she walked forward toward Dumbledore, extending a glittering hand. Dumbledore, though tall himself, had barely to bend to kiss it.

"My dear Madame Maxime," he said. "Welcome to Hogwarts."

"Dumbly-dorr," said Madame Maxime in a deep voice. "I 'ope I find you well?"

"In excellent form, I thank you," said Dumbledore.

"My pupils," said Madame Maxime, waving one of her enormous hands carelessly behind her.

Harry, whose attention had been focused completely upon Madame Maxime, now noticed that about a dozen boys and girls, all, by the look of them, in their late teens, had emerged from the carriage and were now standing behind Madame Maxime. They were shivering, which was unsurprising, given that their robes seemed to be made of fine silk, and none of them were wearing cloaks. A few had wrapped scarves and shawls around their heads. From what Harry could see of them (they were standing in Madame Maxime's enormous shadow), they were staring up at Hogwarts with apprehensive looks on their faces.

"As Karkaroff arrived yet?" Madame Maxime asked.

"He should be here any moment," said Dumbledore. "Would you like to wait here and greet him or would you prefer to step inside and warm up a trifle?"

"Warm up, I think," said Madame Maxime. "But ze 'orses -"

"Our Care of Magical Creatures teacher will be delighted to take care of them," said Dumbledore, "the moment he has returned from dealing with a slight situation that has arisen with some of his other – er – charges."

"Skrewts," Ron muttered to Harry, grinning.

"My steeds require – er – forceful 'andling," said Madame Maxime, looking as though she doubted whether any Care of Magical Creatures teacher at Hogwarts could be up to the job. "Zey are very strong ..."

"I assure you that Hagrid will be well up to the job," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"Very well," said Madame Maxime, bowing slightly. "Will you please inform zis 'Agrid zat ze 'orses drink only single-malt whiskey?"

"It will be attended to," said Dumbledore, also bowing.

"Come," said Madame Maxime imperiously to her students, and the Hogwarts crowd parted to allow her and her students to pass up the stone steps.

"How big d'you reckon Durmstrang's horses are going to be?" Seamus Finnigan said, leaning around Lavender and Parvati to address Harry and Ron.

"Well, if they're any bigger than this lot, even Hagrid won't be able to handle them," said Harry. "That's if he hasn't been attacked by his skrewts. Wonder what's up with them?"

"Maybe they've escaped," said Ron hopefully.

"Oh don't say that," said Hermione with a shudder. "Imagine that lot loose on the grounds ..."

They stood, shivering slightly now, waiting for the Durmstrang party to arrive. Most people were gazing hopefully up at the sky. For a few minutes, the silence was broken only by Madame Maxime's huge horses snorting and stamping. But then -

"Can you hear something?" said Ron suddenly.

Harry listened; a loud and oddly eerie noise was drifting toward them from out of the darkness: a muffled rumbling and sucking sound, as though an immense vacuum cleaner were moving along a riverbed.

"The lake!" yelled Lee Jordan, pointing down at it. "Look at the lake!"

From their position at the top of the lawns overlooking the grounds, they had a clear view of the smooth black surface of the water – except that the surface was suddenly not smooth at all. Some disturbance was taking place deep in the center; great bubbles were forming on the surface, waves were now washing over the muddy banks – and then, out in the very middle of the lake, a whirlpool appeared, as if a giant plug had just been pulled out of the lake's floor.

What seemed to be a long, black pole began to rise slowly out of the heart of the whirlpool ... and then Harry saw the rigging ... "It's a mast!" he said to Ron and Hermione.

Slowly, magnificently, the ship rose out of the water, gleaming in the moonlight. It had a strangely skeletal look about it, as though it were a resurrected wreck, and the dim, misty lights shimmering at its portholes looked like ghostly eyes. Finally, with a great sloshing noise, the ship emerged entirely, bobbing on the turbulent water, and began to glide toward the bank. A few moments later, they heard the splash of an anchor being thrown down in the shallows, and the thud of a plank being lowered onto the bank.

People were disembarking; they could see their silhouettes passing the lights in the ship's portholes. All of them, Harry noticed, seemed to be built along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle ... but then, as they drew nearer, walking up the lawns into the light streaming from the entrance hall, he saw that their bulk was due to the fact that they were wearing cloaks of some kind of shaggy, matted fur. But the man who was leading them up to the castle was wearing furs of a different sort: sleek and silver, like his hair.

"Dumbledore!" he called heartily as he walked up the slope. "How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?"

"Blooming, thank you, Professor Karkaroff," Dumbledore replied.

Karkaroff had a fruity, unctuous voice; when he stepped into the light pouring from the front doors of the castle they saw that he was tall and thin like Dumbledore, but his white hair was short, and his goatee (finishing in a small curl) did not entirely hide his rather weak chin. When he reached Dumbledore, he shook hands with both of his own.

"Dear old Hogwarts," he said, looking up at the castle and smiling; his teeth were rather yellow, and Harry noticed that his smile did not extend to his eyes, which remained cold and shrewd. "How good it is to be here, how good ... Viktor, come along, into the warmth ... you don't mind, Dumbledore? Viktor has a slight head cold ..."

Karkaroff beckoned forward one of his students. As the boy passed, Harry caught a glimpse of a prominent curved nose and thick black

eyebrows. He didn't need the punch on the arm Ron gave him, or the hiss in his ear, to recognize that profile.

"Harry – it's Viktor Krum!"

"For heaven's sake, Ron, he's only a Quidditch player," said Hermione.

"Only a Quidditch player?" Ron said, looking at her as though he couldn't believe his ears. "Hermione – he's one of the best Seekers in the world! I had no idea he was still at school!"

"And you go to school with another one of the best Seekers in the world. Are you going to start fawning all over Harry?"

Harry stopped suddenly. "C'mon Hermione, I'm not *that* good."

"Harry, I've checked the Quidditch statistics, and you rank alongside Seekers such as Wimble, Franklin, and Krum. And you and Krum are still in school yet. Mind you, he's three years older than you, and you still rank alongside him."

Harry blinked. "When did you become such a Quidditch groupie?" he asked finally. She mumbled in response. "Come again?"

"I said 'Ever since I got involved with three Quidditch mad paramours.' Happy now?" She was blushing furiously.

He smiled and took her hand, while Ron took the other one. They turned around, and Harry couldn't help but notice Ginny's eyes flickering to Neville.

He sidled up next to her. "I think he feels the same way, Ginny. Feel free to talk to him, if you want." At her surprised look, he said, "You're letting me discover how I feel about Hermione while I'm with you. What kind of a hypocrite would I be to deny you the same chance with Neville?" He kissed her cheek. Her eyes wide, she turned to talk to Neville, who almost tripped when she stopped next to him.

"That's sweet, Harry," Hermione said. "Most boys wouldn't even contemplate what you just did."

Harry laughed. "I share one of my girlfriends with one of my best friends, why not the other one? It's not like Neville would ever intentionally harm her." He shrugged. "Besides, I've been her only boyfriend ever. She might discover that Neville is her One True Love." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Or it could be a particularly sexy Gryffindor bookworm we all know," he said quietly. He stopped for just a moment. "I think I've been taking lessons in being suave from Sirius. Gotta stop that." She laughed and gently swatted his arm.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their House tables, the staff entered, filing up to the top table and taking their seats. Last in line were Professor Dumbledore, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. When their headmistress appeared, the pupils from Beauxbatons leapt to their feet. A few of the Hogwarts students laughed. The Beauxbatons party appeared quite unembarrassed, however, and did not resume their seats until Madame Maxime had sat down on Dumbledore's left-hand side. Dumbledore remained standing, and a silence fell over the Great Hall.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and – most particularly – guests," said Dumbledore, beaming around at the foreign students. "I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable. The tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast," said Dumbledore. "I now invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home!" He sat down, and Harry saw Karkaroff lean forward at once and engage him in conversation.

The plates in front of them filled with food as usual. The house-elves in the kitchen seemed to have pulled out all the stops; there was a greater variety of dishes in front of them than Harry had ever seen, including several that were definitely foreign.

"What's that?" said Ron, pointing at a large dish of some sort of shellfish stew that stood beside a large steak-and-kidney pudding.

"Bouillabaisse," said Hermione.

"Bless you," said Ron.

"It's French," said Hermione, "I had it on holiday summer before last. It's very nice."

"I'll take your word for it," said Ron, helping himself to black pudding.

The Great Hall seemed somehow much more crowded than usual, even though there were barely twenty additional students there; perhaps it was because their differently colored uniforms stood out so clearly against the black of the Hogwarts' robes. Now that they had removed their furs, the Durmstrang students were revealed to be wearing robes of a deep bloodred.

Hagrid sidled into the Hall through a door behind the staff table twenty minutes after the start of the feast. He slid into his seat at the end and waved at Harry, Ron, and Hermione with a very heavily bandaged hand. "Skrewts doing all right, Hagrid?" Harry called.

"Thrivin'," Hagrid called back happily.

"Yeah, I'll just bet they are," said Ron quietly. "Looks like they've finally found a food they like, doesn't it? Hagrid's fingers."

At that moment, a voice said, "Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?"

It was one of the girls from Beauxbatons. She had finally removed her muffler. A long sheet of silvery-blond hair fell almost to her waist. She had large, deep blue eyes, and very white, even teeth.

Ron went purple. He stared up at her, opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out except a faint gurgling noise.

"Yeah, have it," said Harry, pushing the dish toward the girl.

"You 'ave finished wiz it?"

"Yeah," Ron said breathlessly. "Yeah, it was excellent."

The girl picked up the dish and carried it carefully off to the Ravenclaw table. Ron was still goggling at the girl as though he had never seen one before. Harry started to laugh. The sound seemed to

jog Ron back to his senses. "She's a veela!" he said hoarsely to Harry.

"Of course she isn't!" said Hermione tartly. "I don't see anyone else gaping at her like an idiot!"

But she wasn't entirely right about that. As the girl crossed the Hall, many boys' heads turned, and some of them seemed to have become temporarily speechless, just like Ron.

"I'm telling you, that's not a normal girl!" said Ron, leaning sideways so he could keep a clear view of her. "They don't make them like that at Hogwarts!"

"They make them alright at Hogwarts," said Harry without thinking, and his eyes slid to Hermione, who responded with wide eyes, and then a demure pinkening of her cheeks.

"You've got to teach me how you do that, mate," Ron muttered.

"Do what?" Harry asked, honestly puzzled.

"Lord love a duck, he does it naturally!" Seamus exclaimed. Harry proceeded to take some good-natured ribbing at the table at that point, and was treated to several of the girls looking at him speculatively – not just from the Gryffindor table, either. Word passed quickly, as it is wont to do in a school environment, about the goings on at the other tables and Harry's beautiful compliment to Hermione.

When the second course arrived they noticed a number of unfamiliar desserts too. Ron examined an odd sort of pale blancmange closely, then moved it carefully a few inches to his right, so that it would be clearly visible from the Ravenclaw table. The girl who looked like a veela appeared to have eaten enough, however, and did not come over to get it.

Once the golden plates had been wiped clean, Dumbledore stood up again. A pleasant sort of tension seemed to fill the Hall now. Harry felt a slight thrill of excitement, wondering what was coming. Several seats down from them, Fred and George were leaning forward, staring at Dumbledore with great concentration.

"The moment has come," said Dumbledore, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. "The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket, just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know them, Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation" – there was a smattering of polite applause as Harry realised that two more people had shown up at the head table – "and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman than for Crouch, perhaps because of his fame as a Beater, or simply because he looked so much more likeable. He acknowledged it with a jovial wave of his hand. Bartemius Crouch did not smile or wave when his name was announced. Remembering him in his neat suit at the Quidditch World Cup, Harry thought he looked strange in wizard's robes. His toothbrush mustache and severe parting looked very odd next to Dumbledore's long white hair and beard.

"Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament," Dumbledore continued, "and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts." At the mention of the word 'champions,' the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Perhaps Dumbledore had noticed their sudden stillness, for he smiled as he said, "The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch."

Filch, who had been lurking unnoticed in a far corner of the Hall, now approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old. A murmur of excited interest rose from the watching students; Dennis Creevey actually stood on his chair to see it properly, but, being so tiny, his head hardly rose above anyone else's.

"The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman," said Dumbledore as Filch placed the chest carefully on the table before him, "and they have made the necessary arrangements for each

challenge. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways ... their magical prowess – their daring – their powers of deduction – and, of course, their ability to cope with danger."

At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing.

"As you know, three champions compete in the tournament," Dumbledore went on calmly, "one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire."

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open. Dumbledore reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames.

Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone in the Hall.

"Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet," said Dumbledore. "Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete.

"To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation," said Dumbledore, "I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

"Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the

tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all."

"An Age Line!" Fred Weasley said, his eyes glinting, as they all made their way across the Hall to the doors into the entrance hall. "Well, that should be fooled by an Aging Potion, shouldn't it? And once your name's in that goblet, you're laughing -- it can't tell whether you're seventeen or not!"

"But I don't think anyone under seventeen will stand a chance," said Hermione, "we just haven't learned enough..."

"Speak for yourself," said George shortly. "You'll try and get in, won't you, Harry?"

"Two words for you, George. 'Hell', and 'No'. End of subject."

"Don't you want the fame and the glory?" Fred asked.

"No, no, and no."

"He only asked about two things," George said.

"I was short-circuiting whatever his next question was. Chances are the answer is no."

"So you don't mind if I ask Hermione out on a date?" Fred asked with a grin.

"Considering it's *her* choice as to whether or not she accepts? And remember, she knows a lot of interesting charms, jinxes and hexes."

The twins just blinked at him for a moment in surprise. "Look. I'm fourteen. I'd love to think that I've found the love of my life in either Ginny or Hermione, but I've seen people that were supposedly in love divorce. Hell, I was the reason they divorced! And they got together here in Hogwarts. As much as I love the romantic ideal, I know

otherwise. I'm not expecting to find my true love while a student. I'm trying to learn from other peoples mistakes."

The room was silent, and he realised that everyone in the room was listening to him. Hermione suddenly stood and ran from the room, tears flowing freely. He watched her for a moment, and looked to Ron. "I think I'm the worst person to follow her right now, Ron. Go after her and make sure she's all right, okay?" Ron nodded and walked out.

"Good going, brother dear," Sienna said with a shrug. "Any more bright ideas you want to voice?"

"Am I wrong? You were there when Mum and your dad divorced. I'm the reason, and that taught me that love isn't forever. I just set myself up for pain if I fall into the trap of thinking that it is." He stood. "Well, I suppose I should head back to the Tower, so that the rest of the Tower can hit me for hurting Hermione."

"Why, Harry?" James Junior asked.

"I hurt her. I broke Malfoy's face for doing the same. So I can expect to be on the receiving end this time."

"Don't you love her?" Seamus asked as Neville and a fairly annoyed Ginny left the Hall.

"I'd love to think that I found the girl I'd spend the rest of my life with in one of those two. But that doesn't happen. Professor Black had something like thirty girlfriends while he was here. Even Mum had multiple boyfriends – not at the same time, she's not a pervert like me – and I'll bet she thought any of them was The Real Thing when she was with them. It feels like I found The Real Thing with both Ginny and Hermione, so that proves right out that I haven't, or else I'd have chosen *one* of them."

"Way to go, Potter," Malfoy said as he passed. "Right romantic of you." Harry's fist casually came out and clipped the blonde boy's chin, knocking him off his feet, but he was caught by Crabbe and Goyle.

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Saturday was not one of Harry's better days. It seemed that most of Gryffindor Tower had decided to shun him for making Hermione cry, so he was alone for the majority of the morning. He finally decided to go down by the lake, where he sat for the rest of the day, missing lunch. Were it not for Sienna coming down to get him for dinner, which apparently had mandatory attendance, he would have simply headed up to bed early.

He walked into the Great Hall to silence, and Gryffindor made room for him – more than necessary. Neither Hermione or Ginny would look at him. The Goblet of Fire had been moved; it was now standing in front of Dumbledore's empty chair at the teachers' table.

The Halloween feast seemed to take much longer than usual. Perhaps because it was their second feast in two days, Harry didn't seem to fancy the extravagantly prepared food as much as he would have normally. While everyone else in the Hall was waiting for the selection process, judging by the constantly craning necks, the impatient expressions on every face, the fidgeting, and the standing up to see whether Dumbledore had finished eating yet, Harry simply wanted the plates to clear, and to hear who had been selected as champions so that he could just go to bed.

At long last, the golden plates returned to their original spotless state; there was a sharp upswing in the level of noise within the Hall, which died away almost instantly as Dumbledore got to his feet. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone. Ludo Bagman was beaming and winking at various students. Mr. Crouch, however, looked quite uninterested, almost bored.

"Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision," said Dumbledore. "I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions' names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber" – he indicated the door behind the staff table – "where they will be receiving their first instructions."

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were

extinguished, plunging them into a state of semi-darkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall, the sparkling bright, blue-whiteness of the flames almost painful on the eyes. Everyone watched, waiting ... a few people kept checking their watches ...

"Any second," Lee Jordan whispered, two seats away from Harry.

The flames inside the goblet turned red suddenly. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it – the whole room gasped.

Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm's length, so that he could read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue-white.

"The champion for Durmstrang," he read, in a strong, clear voice, "will be Viktor Krum."

"No surprises there!" yelled Ron as a storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. Harry saw Viktor Krum rise from the Slytherin table and slouch up toward Dumbledore; he turned right, walked along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

"Bravo, Viktor!" boomed Karkaroff, so loudly that everyone could hear him, even over all the applause. "Knew you had it in you!"

The clapping and chatting died down. Now everyone's attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, turned red once more. A second piece of parchment shot out of it, propelled by the flames.

"The champion for Beauxbatons," said Dumbledore, "is Fleur Delacour!"

"It's her, Ron!" Harry shouted as the girl who so resembled a veela got gracefully to her feet, shook back her sheet of silvery blonde hair, and swept up between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

"Oh look, they're all disappointed," Hermione said over the noise, nodding toward the remainder of the Beauxbatons party.

'Disappointed' was a bit of an understatement, Harry thought. Two of the girls who had not been selected had dissolved into tears and were sobbing with their heads on their arms.

When Fleur Delacour too had vanished into the side chamber, silence fell again, but this time it was a silence so stiff with excitement you could almost taste it. The Hogwarts champion was next.

The Goblet of Fire turned red once more; sparks showered out of it; the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and from its tip Dumbledore pulled the third piece of parchment.

"The Hogwarts champion," he called, "is Cedric Diggory!"

"No! " said Ron loudly, but nobody heard him except Harry; the uproar from the next table was too great. Every single Hufflepuff had jumped to his or her feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers' table. Indeed, the applause for Cedric went on so long that it was some time before Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real -"

But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everybody what had distracted him.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out a long hand and seized the parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. Then Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out -

"Harry Evans Black."

The sound in the Great Hall was anything but joyful at the sound of Harry's name. An angry buzzing began from the Hufflepuff table, and someone actually threw something with amazing accuracy, managing to score a direct hit, opening up a slice on his forehead. Harry's reaction was to stand and walk toward the doors of the Great Hall.

"Harry, you must join the other champions," the Headmaster said.

Harry turned back to face him. He had made no effort to stop the blood flow, so he already looked horrific. "Tell you what. How about the person who put my name in the Goblet goes in there instead? I'll participate over my dead body."

"It's a binding magical contract," Dumbledore replied. "It is quite possible that you could be quite literally correct."

He blinked, only partially to keep blood out of his eyes. "You mean to tell me that one of the tests is to survive the *selection process*?" He turned and began to stalk forward, toward the Headmaster. "You can't possibly be telling me that because that cup is too *fucking* stupid to know that I didn't enter, that I could end up dead, *just for refusing to play by rules that I didn't agree to in the first place!*" he bellowed. The sound echoed off the roof, and several students clapped their hands over their ears.

"It is actually more likely that you would lose your magic by not competing," Bartemius Crouch said, sounding for all the world as if he were delivering a verdict in court.

Harry pulled his wand out and grasped it between both hands, but Dumbledore summoned it before Harry could complete the motion of snapping it. He snarled at the man. "You're going to force me to compete anyway, aren't you?"

The pain in Dumbledore's eyes was evident to everyone. "I must, Harry. I do not wish you dead or a Squib."

Harry sighed. "Fine. I promise not to snap my wand if you hand it back to me." Dumbledore gently handed the holly and phoenix

feather wand back to Harry, who nodded and made a movement to put it back into his sleeve, but suddenly whipped around and screamed "*Reducto!*" while pointing at the Goblet, which exploded into dust. He then calmly slid his wand into his sleeve.

"Do you know what you've done!" Crouch screamed, showing the first emotion Harry had ever seen from the man. "You destroyed a priceless artefact!"

"That may very well have sent my son to his death," Lily Black said dangerously. "Are you telling me that a human life is less important than a stupid cup?"

Crouch obviously realised that the answer he wanted to give was dangerous at best. "The Goblet of Fire was irreplaceable. We don't know how it was made."

She snorted. "I can list you at least ten charms that were used in that thing. Talk to Filius Flitwick and myself later if you want to build a new one. I'm betting we can come up with a better designed one."

"You don't understand," Crouch was saying softly, as if a migraine had suddenly come upon him. "it's not what it does, it's that it was a one-of-a-kind item."

"I'd appreciate you not telling me that the Goblet is more important than my son's life," Sirius growled at the Ministry official. Crouch decided that it was finally smartest to remain silent.

Dumbledore ushered Harry into the side room for the final instructions. Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory, and Fleur Delacour were grouped around the fire. They looked strangely impressive, silhouetted against the flames. Krum, hunched-up and brooding, was leaning against the mantelpiece, slightly apart from the other two. Cedric was standing with his hands behind his back, staring into the fire. Fleur Delacour looked around when Harry walked in and threw back her sheet of long, silvery hair.

"What is it?" she said. "Do zey want us back in ze Hall?"

"No, the late, unlamented Goblet decided that I was the fourth of three champions."

Viktor Krum straightened up. His surly face darkened as he surveyed Harry. Cedric looked nonplussed. He looked at Harry as though sure he must have misheard what Harry had said. Fleur Delacour, however, tossed her hair, smiling, and said, "Oh, vairy funny joke, Meester Black."

"There is no joke about it, Miss Delacour," Albus Dumbledore. "Harry's name did, in fact, come out of the now destroyed Goblet." He turned to Harry. "Your action may have some unpleasant side-effects later, Harry. One does not simply destroy a priceless artefact on a whim."

"Oh, that was no whim, sir. If people want to choose champions for another Triwizard Tournament, they won't be using one so stupid that it can't tell when someone's name was put in by someone else."

"But evidently zair 'as been a mistake," she said contemptuously to Dumbledore, refusing to speak to Harry. "E cannot compete. 'E is too young."

The door behind them opened again, and a large group of people came in: Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape. Harry heard the buzzing of the hundreds of students on the other side of the wall, before Professor McGonagall closed the door.

"Madame Maxime!" said Fleur at once, striding over to her headmistress. "Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!" Somewhere under Harry's numb disbelief he felt a ripple of anger. Little boy?

Madame Maxime had drawn herself up to her full, and considerable, height. The top of her handsome head brushed the candle-filled chandelier, and her gigantic black-satin bosom swelled. "What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?" she said imperiously. "I do not buy zat little performance out zair!"

"I'd rather like to know that myself, Dumbledore," said Professor Karkaroff. He was wearing a steely smile, and his blue eyes were like chips of ice. "Two Hogwarts champions? I don't remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions – or have I not read the rules carefully enough?"

He gave a short and nasty laugh.

"C'est impossible," said Madame Maxime, whose enormous hand with its many superb opals was resting upon Fleur's shoulder. "Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions. It is most unjust."

"We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, his steely smile still in place, though his eyes were colder than ever. "Otherwise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools."

"It's no one's fault but Potter's, Karkaroff," said Snape softly. His black eyes were alight with malice. "Don't go blaming Dumbledore for Potter's determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here -"

"Fuck you, Snivellus," Harry growled. "I wouldn't put it past you to have put my name in there yourself." He stalked up to the greasy haired man's face. "And you know bloody well that I'm not a Potter, you arsehole. Or are you too stupid to remember that?"

"One thousand points from Gryffindor, and detentions with me for the rest of the year, Potter!" sneered the Potions Master. He opened his mouth to speak further, but found himself doubled over as Harry showed everyone that he had done an excellent job of learning the martial arts that Lily had signed him up for over the years. Snape found himself retching into a conveniently conjured waste basket.

Harry looked at the Headmaster. "Does the fact that I'm no longer a student at this school have any bearing on whether or not I have to compete?"

"Unfortunately, Harry, it will not. Besides, as I will remind Severus when he finishes returning his dinner, you are already on edge, and he was intentionally pushing you past it."

"Ah, but of course zis boy is lying!" cried Madame Maxime. "'E wishes the glory for competing. 'E stands no chance against my Fleur, but zat makes no difference to glory seekers like 'eem." Harry's teeth ground together.

"He could not have crossed the Age Line," said Professor McGonagall sharply. "I am sure we are all agreed on that -"

"Dumbly-dorr must 'ave made a mistake wiz ze line," said Madame Maxime, shrugging.

"It is possible, of course," said Dumbledore politely.

"Dumbledore, you know perfectly well you did not make a mistake!" said Professor McGonagall angrily. "Really, what nonsense! Harry could not have crossed the line himself, and as Professor Dumbledore believes that he did not persuade an older student to do it for him, I'm sure that should be good enough for everybody else!" She shot a very angry look at Professor Snape, who was still retching, but it was now dry heaves.

"Got Veritaserum?" Harry asked.

"That is illegal to give to a student, Harry," Dumbledore said.

"Get Mum and Dad in here then, and get them to agree to it. I refuse to sit here and be the scapegoat for everyone while some jackass gets his jollies by putting my name in. Check out if Malfoy got one of his cronies to do it."

"Harry, there are reasons why it is not given to someone whose magical core has not yet settled. You could yet end up as a Squib."

"Fine," Harry said. "Give me a second. Um, I know, I wrote my name on a slip of paper and used *Wingardium Leviosa* to drop it in the Goblet. How's that work for you?"

"That would not have worked," Crouch said.

"Mr. Crouch ... Mr. Bagman," said Karkaroff, "you are our objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?"

Bagman wiped his round, boyish face with his handkerchief and looked at Mr. Crouch, who was standing outside the circle of the firelight, his face half hidden in shadow. He looked slightly eerie, the half darkness making him look much older, giving him an almost skull-like appearance. When he spoke, however, it was in his usual curt voice. "We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament."

"Well, Barty knows the rule book back to front," said Bagman, beaming and turning back to Karkaroff and Madame Maxime, as though the matter was now closed.

"I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my students," said Karkaroff. He had dropped his unctuous tone and his smile now. His face wore a very ugly look indeed. "You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It's only fair, Dumbledore."

"We can't do that," Bagman said. "The Goblet was destroyed, remember?"

"Very convenient, is it not?" Karkaroff asked, his voice no longer the usual unctuous tone. "Two champions chosen from the Goblet for one school, and then it is conveniently destroyed. After all our meetings and negotiations and compromises, I little expected something of this nature to occur! I have half a mind to leave now!"

"No, you just have half a mind," Harry snarled.

"How dare you!" thundered Karkaroff, who took two steps forward and backhanded Harry with a closed fist. Harry landed on a short table and felt a rib break.

Gasping, he climbed to his feet, drawing the sword of Gryffindor and stepping closer to Karkaroff. Dumbledore got in his way before he

could reach the Durmstrang headmaster. "Killing him won't help anything, Harry!"

"I wasn't going to kill him," Harry gasped. "I just thought I'd return the favour and break one of his ribs, just like he broke mine." He fell to one knee. "Just a second." He sheathed the blade, pulled his wand and cast a spell that tightly bound his ribs. "Ah!" he screamed in pain, almost blacking out.

Finally getting his wind back, he stood with some help. "I will get my revenge, Kaka. I don't know when, but you'd better watch your fucking back."

"Mr. Black," McGonagall said severely.

"Forget that. I know it's low class. I find that I can't care right now. I have had two years of terror and fighting for my life here, and then last year was wonderful; it was nice and quiet, with no madman trying to find a way to gain immortality and no psychotic intelligent diaries. Now I get in here and find that I am probably not going to survive this year, because all the challenges were designed for sixth and seventh year students. So forgive me if I feel like using a little low class language. Everyone is already looking down their noses at me – let's give 'em a real reason."

"Save it, Potter," Fleur spat out, stamping her foot at the same time. "You 'ave ze chance to compete, 'aven't you? We 'ave all been 'oping to be chosen for weeks and weeks! Ze honour for our schools! A thousand Galleons in prize money -- zis is a chance many would die for!"

"And I likely will, you little prostituée," he snarled back at her. "Save your little flouncy tantrums for someone who cares."

"Enough!" Dumbledore said. "Harry, you will apologise to Miss Delacour for your heinous insult."

Harry looked at him for a long moment. "How many points, and how long a detention with whom?" As all the teachers looked at him in surprise, he said, "I am not going to survive this year because of someone who decided to put my name in that Goblet. I'm going down

saying everything I want to this year. Points? Detention? Feh! Has anyone else realised that they could die out there? No! You're all after the glory! *I don't give a flying fuck about the glory or the money!*" He would have said more, but every piece of glass in the room that wasn't enchanted exploded.

"Yes, well," Dumbledore said, at a loss for a moment. "We will talk about this later, Harry." He cleared his throat. "How this situation arose, we do not know," said Dumbledore, speaking to everyone gathered in the room. "It seems to me, however, that we have no choice but to accept it. Both Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in the Tournament. This, therefore, they will do ..."

"Ah, but Dumbly-dorr -"

"My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it."

Dumbledore waited, but Madame Maxime did not speak, she merely glared. She wasn't the only one either. Snape looked furious; Karkaroff livid; Bagman, however, looked rather excited.

"Well, shall we crack on, then?" he said, rubbing his hands together and smiling around the room. "Got to give our champions their instructions, haven't we? Barty, want to do the honors?"

"The first task is designed to test your daring," he told Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor, "so we are not going to be telling you what it is. Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality in a wizard ... very important."

"The first task will take place on November the twenty-fourth, in front of the other students and the panel of judges. The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete the tasks in the tournament. The champions will face the first challenge armed only with their wands. They will receive information about the second task when the first is over. Owing to the demanding and time-consuming nature of the tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests."

Mr. Crouch turned to look at Dumbledore. "I think that's all, is it, Albus?"

"I think so," said Dumbledore, who was looking at Mr. Crouch with mild concern, what with the unprecedented events of the night. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay at Hogwarts tonight, Barty?"

"No, Dumbledore, I must get back to the Ministry," said Mr. Crouch.

"You'll come and have a drink before you go, at least?" said Dumbledore. Crouch merely shook his head in the negative.

"Professor Karkaroff – Madame Maxime – a nightcap?" said Dumbledore.

But Madame Maxime had already put her arm around Fleur's shoulders and was leading her swiftly out of the room. Harry could hear them both talking very fast in French as they went off into the Great Hall. Karkaroff beckoned to Krum, and they, too, exited, though in silence.

"Harry, Cedric, I suggest you go up to bed," said Dumbledore, smiling at both of them. "I am sure Gryffindor and Hufflepuff are waiting to celebrate with you, and it would be a shame to deprive them of this excellent excuse to make a great deal of mess and noise."

Harry glanced at Cedric, who nodded, and they left together. The Great Hall was deserted now; the candles had burned low, giving the jagged smiles of the pumpkins an eerie, flickering quality.

"So," said Cedric, with a slight smile. "We're playing against each other again!"

"I suppose," said Harry sullenly. "You'll prove yourself the better, of course."

"I don't know about that, Harry. You've beaten me at the Seeker game, you just might do that here."

Harry's only response was to give Cedric a look that stated a worry for Cedric's sanity. "Have a good night, Cedric."

"Good night, Harry, and chin up." Harry snorted.

Harry got a shock to find himself facing the Fat Lady already. He had barely noticed where his feet were carrying him. It was also a surprise to see that she was not alone in her frame. The wizened witch who had flitted into her neighbour's painting when he had joined the champions downstairs was now sitting smugly beside the Fat Lady. She must have dashed through every picture lining seven staircases to reach here before him. Both she and the Fat Lady were looking down at him with the keenest interest.

"Well, well, well," said the Fat Lady, "Violet's just told me everything. Who's just been chosen as school champion, then?"

"Balderdash," said Harry dully.

"It most certainly isn't!" said the pale witch indignantly.

"No, no, Vi, it's the password," said the Fat Lady soothingly, and she swung forward on her hinges to let Harry into the common room.

The blast of noise that met Harry's ears when the portrait opened almost knocked him backward. Next thing he knew, he was being wrenched inside the common room by about a dozen pairs of hands, and was facing the whole of Gryffindor House, all of whom were screaming, applauding, and whistling.

"You should've told us you'd entered!" bellowed Fred; he looked half annoyed, half deeply impressed.

"How did you do it without getting a beard? Brilliant!" roared George.

"I didn't," Harry said. "I don't know how -"

But Angelina had now swooped down upon him; "Oh if it couldn't be me, at least it's a Gryffindor -"

"We've got food, Harry, come and have some -- "

"I'm not hungry, I had enough at the feast -- "

But nobody wanted to hear that he wasn't hungry; nobody wanted to hear that he hadn't put his name in the goblet; not one single person seemed to have noticed that he wasn't at all in the mood to celebrate ... Lee Jordan had unearthed a Gryffindor banner from somewhere, and he insisted on draping it around Harry like a cloak. Harry couldn't get away; whenever he tried to sidle over to the staircase up to the dormitories, the crowd around him closed ranks, forcing another butterbeer on him, stuffing crisps and peanuts into his hands. Everyone wanted to know how he had done it, how he had tricked Dumbledore's Age Line and managed to get his name into the goblet.

Finally, when he'd been handed yet another butterbeer, he lost it. The bottle went flying to the floor where it shattered, spraying its contents everywhere. "Are you people fucking stupid or something? Didn't you hear any of what I was screaming at the Headmaster in the Great Hall? What I destroyed a one of a kind magical item over? You actually think that ... yes, you are all that stupid." He turned and stalked from the Tower, heading down to visit his mother and step-father, who finally healed the cut on his forehead and dealt with his ribs.

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Next morning, Harry entered the Great Hall to silence, and then loud boos from the Hufflepuff table. A roll or two bounced off him. As he moved to sit down at the Gryffindor table, they rose as one and left the table. He noticed several heads of red hair in the crowd. "Don't think that I'll forget this, Weasleys. You leave this table right now, and any relationships we had are over." A gasp came from Ginny, who walked over and slapped him.

"That's for calling the entire Tower stupid," she said. She spun on her heel and walked off.

As he sat in silence eating, he heard Malfoy walk over. "Well, it looks like they've finally realised the truth about you, *Potter*. That you're worthless."

Harry ignored him, and Malfoy came closer, putting his hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'm talking to you -aaahhhh!" The last was in a high

pitched squeal, because Harry had rested a hand on the hilt of the sword and shoved down rapidly when Malfoy had touched him. Apparently the hilt managed to impact in the blonde boys nether regions.

Malfoy was dragged from the room by Crabbe and Goyle. "What happened to him?" Hermione asked as she sat down. "And where is everyone else?"

"Teaching me a lesson. I called them stupid last night. I'm surprised that you didn't hear about it this morning."

"I was in the library as soon as it opened. Looking for information. It looks like you'll have to compete, Harry." She paused. "Why did you all them idiots?"

"Even after all that crap last night, when I destroyed the Goblet? They actually thought it was a set-up! I got accused in there and got a broken rib for my troubles. Then I go up to the Tower and they actually ask me how I got around the Age Line! My God, the Gryffindors are making Crabbe and Goyle look like geniuses!"

"Everyone left?"

"Yup. Angelina, Alicia, Katie, Fred, George, Ginny, Ron – all of them. Ginny ended the relationship, too."

Hermione went white. "You're ... you're joking. Tell me you're joking." He simply shook his head. "That stupid girl!" She got to her feet. "I'm going to go talk to those idiots," she said.

He didn't see her again until late that night, before heading down to the professors quarters again for the night. She begged him to come back to the Tower, but he refused.

"Why won't you?" asked Sirius.

"Well, let's see – I called everyone in the Tower stupid because they can't see that I'm risking Azkaban for what I did to the Goblet. They can't think through what was said in their presence – instead, they decided it was all an act to make sure that a Gryffindor got in the

Tournament. Plus, I am no longer in any sort of relationship with anyone named Weasley at this school – and I room with one.”

“You're not friends with the Weasleys any more?” Lily asked, puzzled. “How did that happen?”

“This morning. Breakfast. I came in, and all of Gryffindor stood to leave. I informed the group that all relationships were over if they followed through. Ginny slapped me for calling the Gryffindors stupid, and left with them. Personally, I'm still sore from the ribs, so I don't feel like putting myself in a position to be physically hurt once again. It doesn't help that my big mouth ended the romantic relationship with Hermione, but at least she's still willing to be friends with me.” He shook his head. “I think James Potter is right. I am a drama queen. Well, king.”

“No you're not,” Sirius said. “You're at the end of your rope because someone decided to play a very nasty trick on you, and no one wants to believe it, it seems.”

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If Harry had thought that matters would improve once everyone got used to the idea of him being champion, the following day showed him how mistaken he was. He could no longer avoid the rest of the school once he was back at lessons – and it was clear that the rest of the school, just like the Gryffindors, thought Harry had entered himself for the tournament.

The Hufflepuffs, who were usually on excellent terms with the Gryffindors, had turned remarkably cold toward the whole lot of them. One Herbology lesson was enough to demonstrate this. It was plain that the Hufflepuffs felt that Harry had stolen their champion's glory; a feeling exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that Hufflepuff House very rarely got any glory, and that Cedric was one of the few who had ever given them any by being chosen. Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley, with whom Harry normally got on very well after a long series of talks the previous year, did not talk to him even though they were re-potting Bouncing Bulbs at the same tray – though they did laugh rather maliciously when one of the Bouncing Bulbs wriggled free from Harry's grip and smacked him hard in the face. Ron wasn't

talking to Harry either. Hermione sat between them, making very forced conversation, but though both answered her normally, they avoided making eye contact with each other. Harry thought even Professor Sprout seemed distant with him – but then, she was Head of Hufflepuff House.

It was that night that Harry was forced to go back to his room, if only to get clean clothing. He was faced by the entire House facing him. “Harry, we're sorry,” Angelina said softly.

“Black,” Harry responded. “Use my last name, Johnson. Only my friend gets to call me by my first name.”

He could almost hear the entire House wince as one. “You were right, Harry. We didn't think it through enough,” Ginny said. “That's right, Miss Weasley. You didn't. So maybe I was right to call this entire House stupid. I've had a chance to do a little reading on this Tournament, since there was no one to hang around with on Sunday or today. The odds on the others surviving run at – well, let's work under the assumption of a one in three chance of dying if they work under the old rules. They're trying to make it less lethal, so let's make it one in four as a guess. That's for someone with sixth or seventh year schooling. I have two years before I have that down. From what I could gather from reading the books on it, I have a one in three chance of *surviving*, if I'm lucky. Now tell me what a glorious thing it is that I'm doing, dying for my House.” He looked her in the eye. “You broke up with me yesterday morning because of that, Miss Weasley.” He headed upstairs to the sound of her tears.

Chapter 10

The next few days were some of Harry's worst at Hogwarts. The closest he had ever come to feeling like this had been during those months, in his second year, when a large part of the school had suspected him of attacking his fellow students. He could understand the Hufflepuffs' attitude, even if he didn't like it; they had their own champion to support. He expected nothing less than vicious insults from the Slytherins – he was highly unpopular there and always had been, because he had helped Gryffindor beat them so often, both at Quidditch and in the Inter-House Championship. But he had hoped the Ravenclaws might have found it in their hearts to support him as much as Cedric. He was wrong, however. Most Ravenclaws seemed to think that he had been desperate to earn himself a bit more fame by tricking the goblet into accepting his name, and then destroying it before it could be learned how he had managed it. One Ravenclaw named Cho Chang even went so far as to slap him.

Then there was the fact that Cedric looked the part of a champion so much more than he did. Exceptionally handsome, with his straight nose, dark hair, and gray eyes, it was hard to say who was receiving more admiration these days, Cedric or Viktor Krum. Harry actually saw the same sixth-year girls who had been so keen to get Krum's autograph begging Cedric to sign their school bags one lunchtime.

One Saturday morning, he had discovered that every Hogwarts student in the school (except the Gryffindors) seemed to be wearing buttons that read SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY – HOGWARTS *REAL* CHAMPION. That was bad enough, but they had taken to showing the other message programmed in – press the button and it turned *Avada Kedavra* green with the message BLACK STINKS.

He slammed his hands flat down on the table. “That's it. I don't give a damn about my magical core any more. I want Veritaserum given to me here, in public. I don't want to be in the God-damned tournament anyway, so maybe if I can get my core stripped out, I won't have to compete.”

“Stop your histrionics, Potter,” Snape said from the head table.

"You stay out of this, Snivellus," he replied.

"Fifty points!" Snape yelled.

"You're allowed to insult me, but I can't insult you?"

"Oh, you consider being called a Potter an insult do you?" he asked silkily.

"Being related to that man? You're damned right I consider it an insult. If I found out he really was my father, I'd seriously contemplate slitting my wrists!"

James Potter sat back hard in his chair at that comment. It was obvious that of the many responses that Harry could have given, the Defense teacher felt that this was the least likely of them. Professor Lupin leaned over and said what was obviously an extremely polite 'I told you so', based on his body language.

"Well then, *Potter*," Snape said softly, "Let me go get some Veritaserum from my stores. If you're willing to risk the ability to do magic just so that you don't have to whine any more, then far be it for me to stop you from throwing your life away."

"I think we'd all trust it a bit more if I retrieved some, Severus," Professor Pettigrew said. "Given your open hatred of Harry, I'd suspect you of poisoning him."

"Gentlemen," Dumbledore admonished. "We are before the student body."

"If he chooses to show open hostility toward a specific student before that same student body," Lily said, "then I for one have no problems with hearing a defender speak before that same student body."

Peter, without waiting for permission, disappeared, and reappeared several minutes later with a small phial. "Here it is. Are you sure that you want to do this, Harry?" he asked.

"Yes. I am aware that it stands a fifty-fifty chance of removing my ability to do any sort of magic. I am aware that I will be forced to leave this school and say goodbye to everything I've ever known in my life."

"That's a risk you're willing to take?" he asked incredulously.

"I'm probably going to die in the tournament. If it peels away my ability to do magic, then I don't have to compete, and I get to live."

The Great Hall was silent at that pronouncement. Peter turned to Lily and Sirius. "Do you give permission for this dosing, knowing full well that it could strip away his ability to do magic?"

Harry met his mother's eyes, and he saw shock and then sorrow in them. "Yes," she finally said. "He understands the danger as well as any of us can, and he considers it important enough to risk it." She shook her head, a tear sliding down her cheek.

Sirius nodded. "I'd love to say no, to keep him safe, but that's too late. Maybe he can at least clear his name." He turned to the students. "Be proud of yourselves. Your childishness may well have driven someone far more adult than you to lose his magic."

Albus summoned a squashy armchair for Harry to sit in, facing the students. Peter came down and stood in front of him. "You'll have three drops on your tongue, and we'll wait for about a minute. Then we'll start asking you questions. At least one is going to be something you wouldn't want bandied around the school, I'm afraid."

"Makes sense. How else can you tell if I'm under or not?" Peter nodded. "Well, as they say, 'T'were best done quickly', before I lose my nerve." As Peter pulled the bottle away and opened his mouth, Harry corrected himself. "Not what I meant, sorry. I'm going through with it."

Harry felt an icy numbness run through him as the Veritaserum took effect. He felt nothing as Peter waited and then asked him, "All right. What is your name?"

"Current or birth?"

“Both, if you please.”

“Current name is Harry James Evans Black. Birth name was Harry James Potter.”

“Why do you keep the Evans name and not the Potter?”

“The Potters deny my existence, while my mother and her family love me. I honour the Evans family in that way.”

“Very well. I’m sorry to ask this, but what is the most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to you, and when did it happen?”

Harry really wanted to fight this, but the Veritaserum was too strong. “I saw Hermione naked by accident two years ago. I wouldn’t leave my room until she came in and dragged me out.”

“Why not?”

“She had curves that made me nervous. At the time, I didn’t know why. I wasn’t old enough yet.”

“Do you understand why now?”

“Yes.”

“I think I’ll leave that alone and not ask why.” Harry could hear the grin in Peter’s voice, but could also hear that it was a question.

“Because I’d like to get her naked again and make love to her.” He could feel that he was going to blush furiously when the potion wore off.

“Well, yes ...” Peter hemmed. “Um, I think that proves that he’s under – that was more embarrassing than what I was expecting. On to the questions that he really wanted answered.” He hemmed again. “Harry, did you put your name in the Goblet?”

“No.”

“Did you ask someone else to put your name in the Goblet?”

“No.”

“Do you have any idea how your name got into the Goblet?”

“Yes.”

A gasp tore through the crowd. “How did it get into the Goblet?”

“Someone put my name in there.”

“Do you know who?”

“No.”

“Did you want to be a part of the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Yes.”

“Enough to figure out a way of getting your name entered?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don't have enough training to survive it. I'm most likely going to die if I compete.”

“Correct me if I'm wrong. You wanted to be a champion the way that any student might think about it – that it might be fun.”

“If you ignore the danger, yes.”

“You thought about the danger.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I was almost killed my first two years here. Last year was quiet. I was hoping for another quiet year.”

“You had no desire to *actually* compete.”

“No.”

“What will you do if you find out who put your name in the Goblet of Fire?”

“Use Gryffindor's sword and gut them like a fish.”

“Isn't that a bit harsh?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Peter asked, shocked.

“They are trying to kill me. Why shouldn't I return the favour?”

“Yes, well. Um. I think that he should be taken to the hospital wing to allow the Veritaserum to wear off. We'll know within eight hours if he'll lose his magic.”

Harry was led to the infirmary by Lily, Sirius, Peter, Remus and Hermione. “May I ask you some questions while you're still under, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“I can't stop you.”

“Yes, you can, by telling me that you don't want me to.”

“I don't mind, as long as they aren't as embarrassing as in the Great Hall.”

“Do you love me, Harry?”

“Yes.”

“Why haven't you been around me the past few days?”

“After you broke up with me on the thirtieth, I thought you wanted some space.”

There was silence, and suddenly she gasped. “You thought that I was breaking up with you when I left the Hall!”

“And when you wouldn't talk to me the next day except as a friend.”

“I'm sorry, Harry,” she said. “If you'll have me, I'll still be your girlfriend.”

“Yes.”

“Are you really going to end everything with the Gryffindors?”

He paused and opened his mouth several times. He found that he couldn't answer the question.

“Do you want to end everything with them?”

“No.”

“Why are you, then?”

“They hurt me. They called me a liar, along with the rest of the school. Some of them are the same ones from our first year. How can I trust them again?”

“Does that include Ginny?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I love her.”

“Why tar her with the same brush?”

“She left with them. She supported them. She slapped me. Does she love me? Pick one.”

“Do you feel the same way about her that you do about me? All of it, I mean?”

“Yes.” He could see another question in her eyes, and she was fighting herself to keep from asking it.

"That would be abusing the trust he's given you, if you ask what I think you want to," Lily said.

"I know," Hermione replied. "Doesn't mean I'm not curious."

He was placed in a bed and gently spelled asleep. He awoke later to find the same people still surrounding his bed. Sitting up he said, "Hey guys, I'm awake. Is it out of my system?"

"What's your name? Lie to me if you can."

"Sirius Black. Yes! Good, it's gone." He turned to Hermione and looked at her. Suddenly the memory of what he'd said in the Great Hall came back, and he lit up, bright red.

"Me too, Harry. We're going to need chaperones."

His eyes went wide. "I'm sorry for embarrassing you down there, though."

"Hey, how many girls have ever had their boyfriend tell the world, under Veritaserum mind you, that he thinks they're sexy?" she asked with a blush of her own.

"Well, minus the Veritaserum," Lily said with a grin, "at least thirty girls or so, during Siri's time here. He was well known for declaring true lust at the drop of a hat."

"I resemble that remark!" Sirius replied with a laugh.

"What was the question you wanted to ask, but didn't?" Harry asked Hermione.

Hermione chewed her lower lip. "I was wondering if there were any other girls you wanted to see naked besides me and Ginny," she said softly. "It would have been wrong to ask you."

"Well, if you'd asked it exactly like that, I'd have been able to answer. Remember, I'm fourteen. The thought of a naked girl – *any* naked girl – is a good one to me," he answered her with a laugh. "Heck, a broom servicing kit makes me think about sex. But as for the question,

some girls are better than others. A different phrasing would get you a different answer.”

“What sort of phrasing?” she asked, puzzled.

“Are there any that I'd take an *active* interest in getting naked, as in personally trying to get their clothes off? Depending on whether or not you excluded yourself and Ginny, you'd get radically different answers. If you two were excluded, the answer would be no.”

He turned to his mother. “I think the potion is still having an effect, Mum. I'm not the slightest bit embarrassed at this moment to be telling you and Dad that you'll need to chaperone me and Hermione and Ginny.” Lily just laughed.

“Are you going to forgive them?” Hermione asked hopefully.

“Really, I'll have to. We'll work on fixing the relationships, but ... I don't want to be alone,” he finished softly. “If I shun them, I hurt myself, too. So I have to work on working things out.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “Hermione, I have to apologise for what I said in the Great Hall the other day. It really does feel like love to me, but what do I know? Besides, two people that everyone said were deeply in love got divorced over me. But do know that I will never *intentionally* hurt you.”

“I know, Harry.” She shrugged, and then laughed. “I think I may need to get a Beater bat. After your announcement downstairs, I was getting some very speculative looks.”

“Maybe I woke a few people up.”

She leaned forward and nuzzled his ear. “Only one I'd want awakened is Ron, and he already has the same idea about my curves that you do.”

“Please don't do that,” he whispered back, his voice a little shaky. “I *really* want to make an effort to get you naked right now, and that's not good.”

“Especially since your parents are here,” she replied softly. “Because you'd succeed.”

Harry stopped breathing for quite a few seconds. He fought a valiant battle not to advertise what her comment had done to him, and was actually successful, to his surprise. “I did not just hear that,” he whispered. She only twinkled her eyes at him.

Lily chuckled. “If I tried to keep you two apart, it wouldn't work. I'm going to metaphorically put my fingers in my ears and sing 'la-la-la', alright? Just don't make me a grandmother before you've finished Hogwarts, can you at least agree to that?”

Harry stared at his mother. “Did you just ... no, I'm misunderstanding it.”

“If I try to stop you, it's going to almost assuredly force the two of you to try something -”

“You'd lose all respect for me, Mum. If you say no, then it's no.”

She stared at him for a long moment, and a tear escaped from her left eye. “I'm sorry for what I did to you, Harry. This attitude is partly my fault.” She inhaled. “Please, take every precaution you can.”

“Nothing will happen, Mum,” he said. “I promise you. I won't lose you again.” Lily's response was to start crying.

Harry looked at her for a long moment as Sirius took her into his arms and held her. He stood and walked to the window. “Good going, arsehole,” he whispered to himself. “Lose your friends and hurt your mother. What next?”

“Hey Sirius?” he asked without turning. “Since I seem to be on a roll, what can I do to really screw things up with you? I might as well make a clean sweep of it. Better tell me how to piss off Uncle Remus and Uncle Peter while you're at it.”

Remus walked over and laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. “I understand that you're under stress. I think you're taking too much

onto your shoulders. Don't go looking for extra trouble, especially where none exists."

Harry turned. "I guess last year was so quiet in order to save everything up for this year. If only Fate had at least warned me to bend over and say 'Ah,' y'know? I have no friends in Gryffindor Tower after my outburst at them, since I went way overboard in getting angry; I've lost a girlfriend; and I've just managed to hurt my mother's feelings. I can't get out of the tournament, and I'm sitting here whining about it. I almost wish that Mum's charm were ready, and that it showed me that Potter really is my father. At least then I'd have a *legitimate* reason to slit my wrists!"

"Well, we should know in the spring," Lily said, sniffing. "The charm is in its last testing phase. If it shows that he is, *please* don't do anything rash, son."

She walked over and pulled her son into a hug. "I was crying because I realised just how badly I hurt you while you were growing up. You will never lose my love for you, Harry, no matter what you do. Or my respect, either." She separated from him. "I remember what I was like in my days here. I can't ask you not to do something I once did, because I won't teach you hypocrisy."

"Admit it, you'd lose some respect for me," he said.

"Harry, I had my first sexual experience when I was in third year, with another girl in my dormitory, because we were experimenting. You've lost respect for me now, haven't you?"

"Of course not!"

"Me neither," Hermione said. "It's how I realised I'm bisexual."

Lily nodded at her. "How about the fact that James and I were trying to get pregnant with you in April of our seventh year – that I wanted to leave school pregnant? Did you lose respect for me now?"

He looked at her like she'd just grown a monkey's head on her shoulder. "Why would that make me lose respect for you?"

"Then why do you think that you could lose mine for you? I'd prefer not to hear about it. In other words, find places other than broom closets. But if I have to choose between a happy son who I know understands limits and boundaries and when to cross them, or one who is profoundly unhappy because he's afraid of losing my love for him ... just don't make me a grandmother too early."

She looked up with a grin. "This does not mean that you should bring her to our apartments to make out!" she finished with a laugh. Harry blinked at her, and then theatrically snapped his fingers as if to complain about lost opportunities.

Peter spoke up, intentionally changing the subject. "It's been eight hours. Harry?"

Harry walked over and took his wand from Peter. "Well, here goes. *Lumos!*"

Nothing happened.

"*Lumos!*"

Still nothing.

He stared at the wand for a moment. "I don't know whether to dance for joy or be utterly heartbroken." He looked up at Hermione, and his heart broke at the tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Hermione. So much for our plans." He tossed the wand at Remus, who caught it in mid-air. "Keep it as a souvenir. I'll go get packed."

Before he could move, Hermione ran at him and tackled him in a bone-crushing hug. "I love you, Harry!" she sobbed. "Don't go!"

"I can't stay, Hermione. I'm a Squib now." He was crying his own tears at this point.

She handed him her wand. "Please try again, Harry. Anything!"

He looked at her. For her, he'd try. He looked to a stool in the corner and said, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" He felt something quiver inside him, and then shoot down his arm and through her wand. The stool lifted

into the air and impacted with the wall hard enough to completely splinter it. He touched the end of her wand, and it actually felt hot.

“Uh, *Reparo?*” he said, and the stool immediately stood in one piece. He took the wand back from Remus and gave Hermione hers. “*Lumos!*” he said again, and then blinked away the spots in his eyes.

“Well, I don't think you're a Squib,” Sirius said dryly. “I also happen to wonder if *anyone* in the room can see right now.”

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There was a somewhat amusing story passing around the grounds about some Muggleborn shrieking that the Hospital Wing had been 'nuked' (whatever that meant, some of the pure-blooded students had murmured), but that went away fairly quickly. The other Houses no longer seemed to be shunning Harry, but they also would not come near him, and he was fairly certain that it was now from a sense of shame.

He had begun to mend fences with the Gryffindors by admitting that he had caused some of it by not holding in his temper. They apologised for thinking the way that they did. It was an uneasy truce, to begin with, but slowly, the friendships started to return.

Hermione pulled him aside one day and decided to follow up on one of her questions, and warned him of her intentions. “Who in this House would you like to see nude, Harry? I'm not asking if you're going to try anything.” She finally asked him before she blushed. “I guess I'm wondering if our taste in girls is the same.”

“Oh, so we can sit by the lake and girl watch together?” he laughed. She blushed. “Answer me a question, Hermione. Is Ginny as sexy naked as I think she would be? I've never seen either of you, just managed to get in some enjoyable caresses under shirts.”

“Well, she certainly makes my pulse race when we're alone at the Burrow,” she whispered. “If you can get something started with her again, make sure you nibble her left shoulder blade. We don't know why, but doing that sends shivers through her that I guarantee you'll enjoy.”

He looked at her with worry. "You really won't hate me for listing names?"

"How about I start, then?" she replied with a smile. "Parvati. I room with her. Trust me, you'll like what you see; I know I do." He was blushing furiously, matching her. "We think alike, apparently," she said, and kissed his cheek. "And she walks around the dormitory room naked, Harry," she whispered.

He bit his lip lightly. "You are evil, you know that? Well, now for mine. Any of the girls on the Quidditch team, I'd have to say. I may be with you, but Angelina does things to me when she shows up down here in that nightie of hers. I think she's still using the same one from two years ago!"

"Yeah, she has gotten taller, hasn't she?" Hermione giggled. They spent a little more time talking about various girls and moved on to other things, unaware that at least one of the girls in question had overheard the conversation.

He realised it the next night when he was talking late into the night with Hermione, his arms around her as she rested against his chest. They were both in their night clothes. Angelina came downstairs, robe open, and Hermione chuckled to note that he made his enjoyment of the amount of leg she was showing evident – to her at least. "Overheard you two talking yesterday," Angelina said quietly. Harry straightened on the couch as best he could.

Hermione looked at Angelina and smiled. "You do know that I'd enjoy it to, if you do what I think you're going to."

"Honey, I'm as bi as you are. Let's just say that all us Gryff Quidd girls are. We make sure we're all squeaky clean after a practice, if you catch my meaning."

"Harry just twitched at that thought, Angelina ... is there a shorter version of your name that you don't mind?"

"Call me Ange, if you want. If you two weren't so secure a couple, and if there'd been Quidditch this year, the three of us were thinking of jumping the poor boy in the showers this year."

"There he goes again," Hermione chuckled.

"Why must you ladies do this to me? I want to be faithful to you and Ginny, if I can ever convince Ginny I forgive her."

"Poor girl's fighting the fact that this is her second betrayal of you, in her mind," Angelina said. "Hell, we all betrayed you. Haven't you noticed Sienna is subdued around you? Jimmy wants to cry occasionally."

"I'll have to talk to the both of them tomorrow. They're family." He laughed. "It's funny to notice that I'm still in the same straits as before. I've got a small number of people willing to talk to me, but no one else in the school will."

Angelina shook her head. "I'll talk to some of the other prefects. That should get them talking again." She smiled and let her robe drop to the floor. "Now for the real reason that I came down here." She reached for the hem of her nightie.

"Stop!" he said in a strangled voice. "Why are you doing this?"

"Any number of reasons, Harry, not the least of which is that I want to. I wasn't joking about the three of us jumping you in the showers."

"Invite me if you do decide to?" Hermoine asked in a breathy voice.

"You got it, girl," was the somewhat breathy response.

"Are you serious, Hermione?" Harry asked, although the strangled tone of his voice made it sound as if he were being choked to death. "Or is there a meaning of 'jumping' that I'm not aware of?"

"Well, the assumption I'm working under is that someone would no longer worrying about a pesky thing like virginity any more."

"Got it in one, Hermione," Angelina chuckled.

"You are giving me permission to ... I have to be hearing that wrong."

"No, you're not. I want you to be sure. If we're meant to be together, we will be. If we're not, then I want us to always be very good friends."

"Preferably the kind that has a lot of sex?" Ange asked, grinning. Hermione nodded furiously with an equally wide grin. Angelina knelt beside the couch. "Harry, with Hermione's permission, I would someday like to give you the gift of my body. Today, I would like to give you the gift of seeing something I know you'd like. I will admit that a small part of it is a sense of guilt over the crap that I've been a party to piling on you. But a lot of it is a deep burn within me to strip naked for someone that I've wanted to for a very long time now." She blinked as she thought about what she'd said. "That made no sense, did it?"

Harry was beyond the ability to speak, which made Hermione smile. "He understood. Trust me on this." She nodded to Angelina, who carefully pulled the nightie over her head and hoped that the darkness of her skin would hide the deep blush that was the only thing she was now wearing. Harry stared at her in rapt attention for a moment before he began to blush very deeply, and hid his head in his hands.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Ange asked.

Hermione's giggle had a very throaty sound to it that sent shivers down Angelina's spine. "It was a bit much for him. Almost too much for me." Angelina smiled and let her fingers gently brush across Hermione's breasts, which was all that the girl in Harry's lap needed as she gasped and shuddered against Harry.

The girls cast a few cleaning spells, kissing Harry and telling him not to be embarrassed, and then Angelina put her nightie back on and sat with them for a while. "Did I really make Harry ..." was as far as she was able to ask before embarrassment finally struck her.

"Yes," Harry said. "I don't think you know the effect you have on the guys in this House, Ange. You three are referred to as 'Quidditch Hotties'. There are guys jealous of me because I am on the team with you. There are several that would develop an actual hatred of me if I admitted that I'd seen you naked."

She cocked her head questioningly, raising an eyebrow to further punctuate the question. "If? Why wouldn't you?"

"Because I'd have to admit where and in what circumstances, and some guys would start to think of you as a slut. I've got enough on my plate, I don't need to go around beating up my fellow students because they don't understand the gift you gave me." He was confused by the way that she seemed to be blinking rapidly, and then saw a tear escape her eye. "I'm sorry, did I say something wrong?" he asked.

Hermione smiled sweetly. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, Harry, you just said something very right." Angelina nodded, and then lunged forward and pulled them both into a hug.

"If we ever get the nerve, Hermione, you're invited," she whispered in the brunette's ear, softly enough that Harry couldn't hear. She let them go and then leaned forward to Harry and let her lips brush his. "Harry, you delightful man, I have never been so complimented in my life. Most other men would crow about what happened." As she stood to head back upstairs, she added, "I won't deny it if the rumours start, Harry. And I will tell Katie and Alicia." She walked upstairs with her robe over her arm, letting the two of them get a pleasant view of her barely covered backside.

He turned his attention back to Hermione "Why are you acting this way? Gods know that I'd love to ... well, what she said ... but why are you willing to go along with it?"

"Harry, I'm strange. I find both men and women attractive, and I've got a few sexual fantasies that I know are considered kinky. You and Ron for one. I don't know if it's a true interest in polyamoury or just the hormones of a teenager, but the thought of being in the showers with you, Ange, Katie and Alicia makes me want to ... well, I think the reaction I have when you played with my breasts over the summer would be familiar, especially since I did it a few minutes ago when she touched me. Multiples excite me, Harry, and I don't know why." She moaned slightly. "Now please hold them," she whispered.

His hands gently slid up under her nightshirt and cupped her breasts. She thanked him for the orgasm he gave her by dealing with the problem she'd caused.

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The rumours did start a few days later, and when people asked Harry about it, he tended to respond with a variation on, "Think about Angelina Johnson. Does she seem like the type of girl who would do that? If you're really curious, ask her." Angelina finally answered it by kissing him on the cheek in public. It wasn't a definitive answer, but for most people, it was enough.

Harry had the long talk he needed with his sister and brother, and there was much hugging when they were done. He pulled Ginny aside and spoke to her as well, but couldn't get her to agree to be his girlfriend again. "This was a conscious decision on my part, Harry. Maybe Riddle left something in my soul when he was with me, but I need to get rid of whatever it was that made me do that before I'll feel worthy again, all right? I do love you, but I can't be with you until I feel like I won't betray you again." She paused. "And now Neville is telling me that he thinks he loves me. What do I do?"

"If you won't date me, Ginny, then date him. He cares for you as much as I do." He shrugged and smiled. "If you and I are destined to be together, Ginny, then we will be some day. Hermione said that to me, and I can't help but think that it's true. If not, then I want us to be the very best friends we can be. That work for you?" She nodded, and their friendship began the process of slow repair as he hugged her.

It was taking a while longer for the rest of the Gryffindors, because many of them simply didn't know Harry very well, and likely hoped that it would blow over and he would forget. As for the other Houses, the display of 'Black Stinks' badges dropped mightily. The Slytherins, of course, continued their use.

Harry surprised everyone one night at dinner, when he approached Fleur Delacour. She looked at him with thinly veiled disgust. "I deserve that look, Miss Delacour. While my insult to you may have been far more private than this setting, my apology for the

unpardonable thing that I said will be public. I was a cad and a boor to a very lovely lady who was rightfully upset at the situation. I do not ask your forgiveness, because I do not deserve it. I do, however, offer my promise that I will never again say such a thing to a lady.” He bowed, formally and respectfully, before turning to go back to the Gryffindor table.

He stopped and turned to face her when he heard her say, “Monsieur Black, please wait. You were also under ze stress, as zey say. I also called you somezing zat you are not, certainment. I called you a little boy. You 'ave proven zat you are a man. You did not ask forgiveness, but it is given.” She walked to him and bent to kiss his cheeks. She surprised everyone by placing a feather kiss on his lips before turning back to her table.

“Truly have we seen a greater magic than any we can cast,” the Headmaster intoned from the head table. “True forgiveness for a truly contrite soul.”

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His attempted apology to Karakaroff was laughed at.

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It was the Saturday before the first task when Harry was approached by Hagrid while they were having a Hogsmeade weekend. “Arry? Come see me later tonight. Bring yer cloak wit' ya.”

“Why?” Harry asked in puzzlement.

“You'll see,” was all that Hagrid would say.

Needless to say, he had more than slightly disturbed when that night's outing led him to discover, along with Madame Maxime, what the first task was.

Dragons.

Big dragons.

Very big dragons.

He also noted that Karkaroff, or Kaka as he still prefer to refer to him, had been following them as well. That meant that Cedric might well be the only one who didn't know what was coming.

The very next day he searched for Cedric, and found him outside, almost as if he were holding court. Students from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw sat around him, listening to tales of what he thought must be Quidditch games, to watch his hands and arms move. The pretty Cho Chang seemed almost star-struck.

He took a deep breath and strode forward. "May I speak with you, Diggory?" he asked when he was close enough. "I have something you want to hear."

"Then say it now."

"No. Privately, but within view of this group, yes." He thought for a second. "In fact, if you agree, I will hand you my wand as a guarantee." Cedric's eyebrows went up, and after a moment's thought, he nodded. The two walked a short distance away, and Harry handed Cedric his wand.

"So, what is so important?" Cedric asked, somewhat annoyed.

"Dragons," Harry said. "That's what's so important."

Diggory blinked at him. "Excuse me?" A moment's thought and his eyebrows rose again. "How did you find out?"

"I happened to be where I could overhear the other school's headmasters – one of them found out, and then the other one did. Since I know that they've told their champions by now, that would leave you as the only one not knowing on Tuesday."

"Why? You could have been far more prepared than I, and taken the lead from me, at least."

"I have every intention of sitting back and waiting through the time limit we have. I don't want to compete, so I'll show up and fulfil the

letter of the contract by being there.” He laughed wryly. “Believe me or not, but I want you to win, Cedric. *You're* the real Hogwarts champion. If we could get rid of that 'Black Stinks' message, I'd gladly wear one of the 'Support Cedric Diggory' badges.”

Cedric laughed, loud enough that the others looked on in surprise, since it wasn't a laugh of derision. “I like you, Black. You're a hell of a Seeker, and now I discover that you'd have done pretty well in Hufflepuff.” His face went serious. “I did a little research on the tournament, and you can't get away with not really competing. You have to make your best effort.”

Harry's response was to repeat a word he had used in anger on Halloween, but was generally not considered either polite or high class. “Indeed,” Cedric laughed. “In fact, if you haven't, you may want to do that for the first time before Tuesday, since none of us may survive to do it after.” At Harry's startled look, which was followed by a bright blush, Cedric threw his head back and laughed. He handed Harry's wand back to him, and they walked to the group together, Cedric's arm around Harry's shoulder.

Harry was as good as his word, as well. Cedric handed him a badge as a joke, and Harry immediately fastened it to his robes. “I was serious, Cedric. I'm not the real champion; I'm just the guy someone is trying to kill. You were chosen fair and square.” The crowd looked at him in awe, and the pretty Ravenclaw Seeker even smiled at him, although there was worry in her eyes. She obviously remembered slapping him. He smiled back with no malice.

Harry met up with what was becoming thought of as his Gryffindor crew – Hermione, Ron, Sienna, James Junior and Ginny – and was greeted with raised eyebrows when they saw the badge. “You guys know my point of view on this tournament,” was his only response. They began a brainstorming session that ranged from the ridiculous to the sublime as to what might be used to protect Harry from the dragons.

It was when Katie came by and stated that she wished Harry could just not be noticed by the dragon that the idea hit him. He surprised

everyone by kissing Katie forcefully on the lips. She surprised him by not releasing the kiss when he tried to.

The rest of the day was spent finding and practising spells.

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Classes were let go early on Tuesday. Harry joked publicly that it was so that the students could watch the champions get slaughtered. He was still wearing the Diggory badge, to many peoples surprise. To his surprise, some students (and at least two faculty) were wearing badges that read:

SUPPORT HARRY BLACK

A REAL CHAMPION

The surprise was seeing Cedric wearing one. "Hey, you didn't have to say anything to me," Cedric whispered quietly. "That told me your character better than anything else could have."

Finally, it was time for the champions to gather for the first task. Professor McGonagall approached him at lunch. "Okay," said Harry, standing up, his fork falling onto his plate with a clatter.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You'll be fine!"

"Yeah," said Harry in a voice that was most unlike his own.

He left the Great Hall with Professor McGonagall. She didn't seem herself either; in fact, she looked nearly as anxious as Hermione. As she walked him down the stone steps and out into the cold November afternoon, she put her hand on his shoulder. "Now, don't panic, just keep a cool head. We've got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand. The main thing is just to do your best, and nobody will think any the worse of you. Are you all right?"

"Yes," Harry heard himself say. "Yes, I'm fine." *I'm lying through my teeth...*

She was leading him toward the place where the dragons were, around the edge of the forest, but when they approached the clump of trees behind which the enclosure would be clearly visible, Harry saw that a tent had been erected, its entrance facing them, screening the dragons from view.

"You're to go in here with the other champions," said Professor McGonagall, in a rather shaky sort of voice, "and wait for your turn, Potter. Mr. Bagman is in there. He'll be telling you the – the procedure. Good luck."

"Thanks," said Harry, in a flat, distant voice. She left him at the entrance of the tent, but not before resting a shaky hand on his shoulder. Harry went inside, feeling a bit shaky himself.

Fleur Delacour was sitting in a corner on a low wooden stool. She didn't look nearly as composed as usual, but rather pale and clammy. Viktor Krum looked even surlier than usual, which Harry supposed was his way of showing nerves. Cedric was pacing up and down. When Harry entered, Cedric gave him a small smile, which Harry returned.

Harry walked over to Fleur. "Miss Delacour? You probably won't believe me, but I really do wish you the best of luck in this competition."

"Please do not take zis wrong, but – why?"

"Because if that magical contract is forcing me to do my best, I want to know that I'm going to be beating the best," he replied with an impudent grin. This was exactly what she needed, because she threw her head back and laughed, then stood and hugged him quickly.

"Zank you, 'Arry Black." She kissed his cheek quickly, causing him to blush.

"Well, now we're all here – time to fill you in!" said Bagman brightly. "When the audience has assembled, I'm going to be offering each of you this bag" – he held up a small sack of purple silk and shook it at them – "from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different – er – varieties, you see.

And I have to tell you something else too ... ah, yes ... your task is to collect a golden egg!"

Harry glanced around. Cedric had nodded once, to show that he understood Bagman's words, and then started pacing around the tent again; he looked slightly green. Fleur Delacour and Krum hadn't reacted at all. Perhaps they thought they might be sick if they opened their mouths; that was certainly how Harry felt, despite the bravado he displayed with his words. But they, at least, had volunteered for this.

And in no time at all, hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of feet could be heard passing the tent, their owners talking excitedly, laughing and joking. Harry felt as separate from the crowd as though they were a different species. And then Bagman was opening the neck of the purple silk sack.

"Ladies first," he said, offering it to Fleur Delacour.

She put a shaking hand inside the bag and drew out a tiny, perfect model of a dragon – a Welsh Green. It had the number two around its neck. And Harry knew, by the fact that Fleur showed no sign of surprise, but rather a determined resignation, that he had been right: Madame Maxime had told her what was coming.

The same held true for Krum. He pulled out the scarlet Chinese Fireball. It had a number three around its neck. He didn't even blink, just sat back down and stared at the ground.

Cedric put his hand into the bag, and out came the blueish-gray Swedish Short-Snout, the number one tied around its neck. Knowing what was left, Harry put his hand into the silk bag and pulled out the Hungarian Horntail, and the number four. It stretched its wings as he looked down at it, and bared its minuscule fangs.

"Well, there you are!" said Bagman. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, do you see? Now, I'm going to have to leave you in a moment, because I'm commentating. Mr. Diggory, you're first, just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle, all right?" Cedric nodded slightly.

Harry did his best to wish him luck a few minutes later when the whistle sounded, and Cedric nodded again, definitely looking as if he might throw up. He left the tent, and the other two stood and began to pace slightly. Seconds later, they heard the roar of the crowd, which meant Cedric had entered the enclosure and was now face-to-face with the living counterpart of his model.

It was worse than Harry could ever have imagined, sitting there and listening. The crowd screamed, yelled and gasped like a single many-headed entity, as Cedric did whatever he was doing to get past the Swedish Short-Snout. Krum was still staring at the ground. Fleur had now taken to retracing Cedric's steps, around and around the tent. And Bagman's commentary made everything much, much worse...Horrible pictures formed in Harry's mind as he heard: "Oooh, narrow miss there, very narrow" ... "He's taking risks, this one!" ... "Clever move – pity it didn't work!"

And then, after about fifteen minutes, Harry heard the deafening roar that could mean only one thing: Cedric had gotten past his dragon and captured the golden egg.

"Very good indeed!" Bagman was shouting. "And now the marks from the judges!" But he didn't shout out the marks; Harry supposed the judges were holding them up and showing them to the crowd. "One down, three to go!" Bagman yelled as the whistle blew again. "Miss Delacour, if you please!"

Harry watched her steel herself and walk to the door. He winked and held up a thumb, and she smiled back at him, threw out her chest and strode from the tent.

The same process started again... "Oh I'm not sure that was wise!" they could hear Bagman shouting gleefully. "Oh ... nearly! Careful now ... good lord, I thought she'd had it then!"

Ten minutes later, Harry heard the crowd erupt into applause once more. Fleur must have been successful too. A pause, while Fleur's marks were being shown ... more clapping ... then, for the third time, the whistle.

"And here comes Mr. Krum!" cried Bagman, and Krum slouched out, leaving Harry quite alone. "Very daring!" Bagman was yelling, and Harry heard the Chinese Fireball emit a horrible, roaring shriek, while the crowd drew its collective breath. "That's some nerve he's showing – and – yes, he's got the egg!"

Harry chuckled. He certainly wouldn't be getting points for style, of that he was sure. And he had a backup plan come to him as he had been walking in the tent. If his first idea didn't work, there was always calling his broom to him and flying circles around the thing.

The whistle sounded, and Harry walked out to the enclosure. The crowd howled out its approval, with the notable exception of the Slytherins, who were booing and displaying their badges. "And here's Black!" Bagman called out. Harry grinned and looked at the Horntail, then cast three spells, one after the other. For the first two, Bagman said simply, "Not sure what he's doing – looks like he's casting some spells on himself. Wonder what's on his mind?" When Harry cast the third and tapped himself on the head, Disillusioning himself, the cry was "Oh ho, so that's his plan! Let's see if it works!"

Harry crept forward, watching the dragon carefully. He was having some trouble moving, since he couldn't see his own feet, but he'd always been fairly sure footed, so he wasn't too worried. On a whim, he pointed his wand at the egg and whispered, "*Accio* egg!" It didn't move. *Not surprised.*

He moved closer and closer, with no sign of movement from the dragon, until he was right next to her. She was on a clutch of eggs, with the golden one right squarely in the middle. She suddenly moved, and Harry stopped moving, or even breathing. He stood for a very long moment before he realised that she had simply been shifting her position. He reached out and gently took the egg from the nest, and he heard Bagman exclaim "Ah ha! It seems to have worked! Now, can he make it out alive?"

Thanks, Bagman, Harry thought wryly. *Just what I need to think about.* He whispered the Disillusionment spell again, and the egg faded away as well. He then whispered the silencing spell he'd cast on his shoes again and ran pell-mell from the enclosure, stopping only when

he was at the edge, where he cancelled all the spells and held the egg skyward. A deafening roar exploded from the crowd.

"That was excellent, Mr. Black!" cried Professor McGonagall – which from her was extravagant praise. He noticed that her hand shook. "You'll need to see Madam Pomfrey before the judges give out your score ... over there, she's had to mop up Diggory already ... just need to make sure you're all right ..." She led him to the tent, and Harry was tempted to tell her that she looked as if she needed it more than he did. In fact - "Professor, you look like you're about to faint. Why not come inside and let her look at you too?" McGonagall merely shook her head and bustled off.

"Dragons!" Madam Pomfrey snorted in disgust, pulling Harry inside. The tent was divided into cubicles; he could make out Cedric's shadow through the canvas, but Cedric didn't seem to be badly injured; he was sitting up, at least. Madam Pomfrey examined Harry, talking furiously all the while. "Dragons, what are they going to bring into this school next? You're very lucky, Mister Black. You're the one competitor with absolutely no injuries whatsoever."

"Now, just sit quietly for a minute – sit and let the adrenaline wear off! And then you can go and get your score."

She bustled out of the tent and he heard her go next door and say, "How does it feel now, Diggory?"

Harry didn't want to sit still. He got to his feet, wanting to see what was going on outside, but before he'd reached the mouth of the tent, some people had come darting inside - Hermione, followed closely by Ron, Ginny, and the Quidditch team.

"Harry, you were brilliant!" Hermione said squeakily. There were fingernail marks on her face where she had been clutching it in fear. "You were amazing! You really were!" She threw her arms around him and kissed him, and he could suddenly feel how scared she'd been by how much she was still shaking – he could even feel her heart pounding rapidly as well as the shivering she was doing, she was holding him so tightly.

"I'm fine," he said with a smile when she let him go. "The only uninjured champion. I'm sorry I scared you, though." He turned to the others and was quickly engulfed in a hug from Ron.

"Mate, maybe it's not manly to admit it," Ron said, "but you scared the heck out of me. I can't believe I ever thought for a second that you wanted this on purpose!"

Harry noticed that Ron was shaking slightly as well, as were the others in the tent, save Wood, who simply looked extremely relieved. "All right, can I assume that it's finally gotten through to you guys about what I said?" They nodded. "Right then. You're forgiven. Can we get on with the back patting and the kissing? Especially the kissing?" He laughed and pulled Fred into a hug as they both made motions to pretend to kiss.

They walked from the tent after he had been thoroughly pounded on the back and then kissed senseless by the other girls. Katie's kiss had caused an interesting reaction, since it had involved tongue, much to his shock, but she hid the reaction until one of the other girls cast a spell to help him hide it without needing a woman to block him. Ron started a running commentary on how the others had done.

"You were the best, you know, no competition. Cedric did this weird thing where he Transfigured a rock on the ground ... turned it into a dog ... he was trying to make the dragon go for the dog instead of him. Well, it was a pretty cool bit of Transfiguration, and it sort of worked, because he did get the egg, but he got burned as well – the dragon changed its mind halfway through and decided it would rather have him than the Labrador; he only just got away. And that Fleur girl tried this sort of charm, I think she was trying to put it into a trance – well, that kind of worked too, it went all sleepy, but then it snored, and this great jet of flame shot out, and her skirt caught fire – she put it out with a bit of water out of her wand. And Krum – you won't believe this, but he didn't even think of flying! And him a professional Seeker! He was probably the best after you, though. Hit it with some sort of spell right in the eye. Only thing is, it went trampling around in agony and squashed half the real eggs – they took marks off for that, he wasn't supposed to do any damage to them." Harry was impressed with how little Ron had needed to breathe during that.

Charlie came up alongside at this point. "Actually no, but none of the competitors knew that. They may have wanted clutching mothers, but there was no way that we were going to risk *any* baby dragons. The real eggs are in stasis, and these ladies will be returned to them very shortly." He clapped Harry on the shoulder. "You are probably one of the sneakiest people I've ever met, and I mean that in a very good way. If you ever decide you want a career in dragon handling, I think a performance like this shows you've got a knack for it." He paused. "I wonder if they speak parseltongue?"

"One way to find out, you know," Harry laughed. "Can you get me close enough that I can speak to one of them without my becoming crispy-fried?"

"Talk to me after the marks are given out and we'll see." They walked to where the judges could see Harry. Madame Maxime was first. After a moment of thought, she held her wand aloft. A silvery ribbon flew out and wound itself into the number eight. This was followed quickly by another eight, from Crouch, and tens from both Dumbledore and Bagman. Karkaroff ended it with a one.

"That slimy little bugger!" Ron was screaming. "You outdid Krum! He gave you a one so you wouldn't end up in first place!"

"You're tied in first place, Harry! You and Krum!" said Charlie Weasley. "Listen, I've got to run, I've got to go and send Mum an owl, I swore I'd tell her what happened – but that was absolutely brilliant. Oh, they told me to tell you you've got to hang around for a few more minutes. Apparently Bagman wants a word, back in the champions' tent."

Fleur, Cedric, and Krum all came in together. One side of Cedric's face was covered in a thick orange paste, which was presumably mending his burn. He grinned at Harry when he saw him. "Good one, Harry."

"And you, from what I hear," said Harry, grinning back.

"Well done, all of you!" said Ludo Bagman, bouncing into the tent and looking as pleased as though he personally had just got past a dragon. "Now, just a quick few words. You've got a nice long break

before the second task, which will take place at half past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth, but we're giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you will see that they open – see the hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg, because it will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it. All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!"

As they exited the tent, Fleur touched Harry's shoulder. "Zank you, Mr. Black," she said. "You 'elped me get my wits about me. I might not 'ave done zat wit'out your 'elp." She leaned forward and planted another kiss on his lips, this one noticeably longer than the one he had received for the apology. She then turned and walked away, and Harry had to admit that it certainly wasn't an unpleasant sight. He shook his head, chuckling, and turned back to his friends. "Well, shall we head back to the castle?" he asked, linking his arms with Hermione and Ron.

When they entered the Gryffindor common room it exploded with cheers and yells again. There were mountains of cakes and flagons of pumpkin juice and butterbeer on every surface; Lee Jordan had let off some Filibuster's Fireworks, so that the air was thick with stars and sparks; and Dean Thomas, who was very good at drawing, had put up some impressive new banners, most of which depicted Harry taunting a dragon that couldn't see him, though a couple showed Cedric with his head on fire.

"Blimey, this is heavy," said Lee Jordan, picking up the golden egg, which Harry had left on a table, and weighing it in his hands. "Open it, Harry, go on! Let's just see what's inside it!"

"He's supposed to work out the clue on his own," Hermione said swiftly. "It's in the tournament rules -"

"I was supposed to work out how to get past the dragon on my own too," Harry muttered, so only Hermione could hear him, and she grinned rather guiltily.

"Yeah, go on, Harry, open it!" several people echoed.

Lee passed Harry the egg, and Harry dug his fingernails into the groove that ran all the way around it and pried it open.

The temperature in the room shot up about twenty degrees instantly, and everyone backed away. Harry could almost hear a voice – or something – but the intense heat kept him far enough away that he couldn't hear it clearly. He leaped over and slammed it shut immediately. “O-kay,” he said slowly. “I think I'll open that one when it's about twenty below outside, with the wind howling. The heat that things puts out should just about make it spring-like.” He shuddered. “Wow, that was ... warm.”

He noticed that a few of the girls had opened their robes slightly to cool down. “Hey, think I ought to open it again?” he asked with an over the top leer on his face. He was treated to giggling from the girls (and a flash of cleavage from Parvati when no one was looking).

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It was the beginning of December when they were reminded about the Yule Ball. Harry especially was told that he *must* have a date, since the champions opened the ball by dancing with their partner.

He thought for a while that day, and had entered the Gryffindor Tower to ask Hermione, just in time to see her throw her arms around Ron and squeal “Yes!” As he asked around the tower, it seemed that everyone had gotten a jump on the idea and had asked before anyone else could. Fred had pounced Angelina, George had Alicia, Neville was taking Ginny, and Dean had worked up the courage to ask Katie Bell. Seamus had asked Lavender.

He was sitting in the courtyard on a particularly mild day when Fleur Delacour sat beside him. “Ow are you, 'Arry?” she asked.

“Looking for a date to the Ball,” he said with a laugh.

“Wiz all *your* girlfriends?” she questioned him, laughing merrily.

“Others got to 'em first,” he responded. “How about you? Got your date lined up?”

"No. Too many are affected my Veela ... 'ow you say ... 'eritage. Zey drool or try to look down my dress. No one is interested in just me."

"More fool them, then. Once we got past my bit of being a boor, I got to thinking that you're a pretty nice girl. Pretty as well. I'm the Neanderthal." A pause. "Actually, that may be an insult to the Neanderthals," he finished with a laugh.

"I'll not 'ear zat!" she said, slapping him surprisingly hard on the arm. "You are ze gentleman!" As they spoke, Albus Dumbledore left the castle, apparently en route to speak with Hagrid. "It is a pity zat champions can not take each ozair to the Ball," she said sadly. "You are ze first boy ... man ... oh, male person," she said with a titter, "... first one to talk to me as a woman in my own right, and not as ze trophy."

"While highly unusual, Miss Delacour, there is no ruling stating that champions must take someone other than another champion to the Ball," Albus said, startling them as they spoke. "If you two wish to attend together, then by all means do. If nothing else, it would be the perfect example of cooperation between the schools." That said, he breezed out of the courtyard.

Harry looked at her and realised that she was serious about her statement. With that, he stood. "Miss Delacour, would you do me the very great honour of accompanying me to the Yule Ball?"

"I am ze one 'onoured, Mr. Black. I am also ... 'ow you say ... delighted." She stood and curtsied, which he answered with a bow.

With a twinkle in his eye, he said, "Want to play a prank of sorts on everyone? We'll tell them we have dates for the Ball, but not whom. They'll be going crazy trying to figure out who we're taking. And no one will expect that it's each other." She answered with a giggle, and hugged him.

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As he expected, the questioning about his having a date was the big thing on everyone's minds, since they all had dates. It was when he heard conversations about trying to set him up with people that he

admitted that he did, in fact, have a date. He drove them absolutely nuts trying to find out who it was.

The castle looked more spectacular than it usually did this time of year. Everlasting icicles had been attached to the banisters of the marble staircase; the usual twelve Christmas trees in the Great Hall were bedecked with everything from luminous holly berries to real, hooting, golden owls, and the suits of armour had all been bewitched to sing carols whenever anyone passed them. It was quite something to hear "O Come, All Ye Faithful" sung by an empty helmet that only knew half the words. Several times, Filch the caretaker had to extract Peeves from inside the armour, where he had taken to hiding, filling in the gaps in the songs with lyrics of his own invention, all of which were very rude.

Snow was falling thickly upon the castle and its grounds now. The pale blue Beauxbatons carriage looked like a large, chilly, frosted pumpkin next to the iced gingerbread house that was Hagrid's cabin, while the Durmstrang ship's portholes were glazed with ice, the rigging white with frost. The house-elves down in the kitchen were outdoing themselves with a series of rich, warming stews and savory puddings, and only Fleur Delacour seemed to be able to find anything to complain about.

"It is too 'eavy, all zis 'Ogwarts food," they heard her saying grumpily as they left the Great Hall behind her one evening. "I will not fit into my dress robes!"

"Now that would be a pity," Harry said. "I guess you'd just have to show up naked!"

"Harry!" gasped Hermione. "Miss Delacour, please forgive ..."

"I'll bet zat my date would enjoy zat," Fleur replied with a laugh, politely ignoring Hermione.

"If he's not a complete pouf, he will," Harry replied. "Hell, some of the girls would like it too!"

"Zank you, 'Arry. I needed ze laugh." She turned to Hermione. "I appreciate what you were trying to do. 'Arry and I 'ave become

friends, and I am getting used to 'iz sense of 'umour. It is nice to be called pretty wiz'out all ze drool."

"You should have asked her, mate," Ron said after she left them.

"I have a date, and so does she," Harry said, trying very hard not to laugh.

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The day of the Ball was interesting. He disappeared to the quarters that his mother and stepfather now shared in order to dress without pestering. "I have managed to go weeks without anyone knowing," he chuckled to Lily. "Only the Headmaster has any idea at all!"

"Yes," she said. "You've even managed to hide it from Peter, and you know his talents."

"I was trained by Marauders, remember," he smiled. "If I tell *you*, will you promise not to tell anyone else?" She nodded, and he leaned forward and whispered into her ear.

Her eyebrows rose. "So all that ..." She paused. "Oh, you are sneaky. Well done!" She left to let him prepare in peace.

He finished dressing and exited the room. "C'mon, Lil!" Sirius was wheedling. "I've got five Galleons riding on this!"

"You bet on our son's date?" she asked dangerously.

"Only amongst the Marauders. Well, actually, just between Remus and Peter. Until James stops being an arse, he's not a Marauder."

"Who'd you vote for?" Harry asked, shocking Sirius to his feet.

"That really cute Indian girl in your tower, Parvati, I think it is?"

"Who'd the other two vote for?" he asked without answering Sirius's unspoken question.

"Ah, Peter figured that it would be the Hufflepuff – Bones, I think it is ... the niece of the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement

– on account that she's rather pretty and ... well, we may be teachers, but we all note the blossoming ones, if you catch my drift."

"Curves like hers?" Lily said. "You'd be blind not to notice her. And she's only fourteen, mind you. Looks twenty without trying." Under her breath she muttered, "Double D without even trying."

Sirius nodded, agreeing with her more vocal statement. "Remus said that you'd surprise us and end up taking someone utterly unexpected. When pressed to choose a name, he named the Delacour girl."

"What kind of odds were there on these dates?" Harry asked.

"Remus was the only one with odds other than one to one. It was a five Galleon bet, which means that whoever wins gets five each from the other two. Unless Remus wins at ten to one odds. Which would give him a total of a hundred Galleons from Peter and I."

"Well, I suppose everyone is ready to pay out to someone tonight?"

"You can solve the dilemma easily. Just tell your old step-dad."

"You'll see when I meet her at the doors." Lily couldn't help but laugh at the stunned look on her husband's face. He looked at the clock. "Oh my! I'd best be going!" he said with a jaunty wave as he left their suite. He waited until he was well out of range before bursting into laughter at the look on his step-father's face.

He reached the entry to the Great Hall to find a few people milling about. Remus was standing near the doors making sure the students did not enter before they were supposed to. He walked over to him. "Professor," he said with a smiling nod.

"Harry," came the reply. "Where's your date?"

"Don't worry, Remus; she'll be here. Oh, by the way, may I offer my congratulations on your windfall?"

Remus looked puzzled for a moment before it finally struck him what Harry was really saying. "May I offer *my* congratulations?" he asked.

“Only Mum and you know at the moment, except maybe for the Headmaster. It's apparently the best kept secret in the school right now. Certainly better kept than the damned dragon debacle.”

He opened his mouth to say more, but he heard Hermione say, “Fleur! Did your date stand you up?” He turned to face the crowd and had his breath taken away. Hermione was in a beautiful gown of periwinkle blue that gave a strong nod to the fact that she was no longer a little girl. Her hair was done up in ringlets of shimmering brown. She looked astonishing, and Ron looked thankful to be alive and to be smiled at by such a beauty.

“Are you sure you're not part Veela?” Fleur asked. “Arry seems to 'ave 'ad ze same reaction as your date.”

Harry blinked and looked to Fleur. All conscious thought left his head for the moment. Fleur's outfit made everyone certain that the person wearing it was a woman. It was cut low between her small breasts, and hugged her gentle curves the way that most of the men apparently wanted to at the moment. It was also blue, but more reminiscent of a shimmering twilight sky, making a startling contrast between dress and pale skin and hair. Despite all that, she still somehow looked alluringly demure in the dress robes.

He finally walked forward and gently kissed her. “Thank you for agreeing to be my date to the Ball, Fleur,” he said to her, enjoying the gasps passing amongst the assembled students.

“Zank you for agreeing to be mine,” she replied. Her kiss was a bit longer than the one that Harry had given her. When they broke, the hall was utterly silent. Not even Malfoy could come up with a rejoinder sufficient to the situation.

The champions lined up outside the hall, and McGonagall looked surprised before a large smile crossed her face for just a moment. “You certainly don't do things by half measures, do you, Mr. Black?” she asked in a voice that told she approved.

The Ball was something of a blur for Harry. He made the rounds of his friends as they danced, enjoying their company, and getting a kiss from each girl as they parted. At some point he actually found himself

looking up at Millicent Bulstrode's face, and he smiled, surprising her. "I am nothing if not fair," he laughed. "And you are an excellent dancer." She had smiled back at him.

He thought he had seen some healing in Ginny's eyes, and he was certain that it was Neville's doing. Hermione had seemed to be dancing on air. He spent much of his time with Fleur, however, even enjoying a romantic walk with her out in the heated atrium.

"Arry, I zink zat we should be careful," she finally said to him. "I am ... we 'ave ... we are both champions, 'Arry. I should not be zinking what I am zinking."

"What are you zi ... sorry, *thinking*, Fleur?"

She leaned forward and kissed him hard. He suddenly realised that the phrase had multiple meanings, given what the kiss did to him. His altered blood flow patterns did not do much for his ability to think coherently. "Zat I would like to take you back to ze carriage and make love to you," she whispered in his ear.

He gulped. "I'm fourteen, Fleur. Why would you want to give me something so precious as yourself?"

She smiled sweetly at him. "Because you may be fourteen in body, but you are a man in spirit."

"We've only known each other for two months, Fleur, and some of that was me being an utter arse to you. Six weeks?" he asked,

"Veela can tell a compatible mate, 'Arry." At his stunned look, she laughed and said, "Zis does not mean zat we are to be married, 'Arry! It simply means zat we are emotionally and sexually compatible." At his blush, she whispered, "I would like to see if zat sense is correct." Her breath across his ear made him shiver.

Harry looked at her. "Gods, Fleur, you don't make it easy on a guy, do you?" he laughed a little shakily. "I like to pretend that I'm an honourable guy, but I'm a human being, too."

"I would not 'ave zis burning inside if you were not an 'onourable man," she whispered.

He ran his hands through his hair, which had become somewhat messier during the process of kissing. "As God is my witness, Fleur, I haven't any idea how to answer you. Part of me is screaming to take you up on your offer, but the other side of me is attempting to hold the first side down in order to beat him into submission easier. I honestly can not answer this question."

"What question, Harry?" Hermione asked as she and Ron walked up hand in hand. "I saw you over here looking bothered by something, and I was fairly certain that it wasn't Fleur."

"It is me," Fleur said softly. "I 'ave told 'im my desires for the night's end, and 'e is torn in 'ow to answer me."

"I might lose the respect of everyone I care for," he said softly.

"For making love to a beautiful woman?" Hermione asked with a smile. He started. "Harry, we've been friends and more for how long? It's a little obvious what might make you want to tear your hair out that would also make you worry over whether or not you might lose our respect." She blushed slightly. "If it were me she were asking, we'd already be en route to wherever the chosen spot was."

"Perhaps anoizzer night, 'Ermione," Fleur said softly. "I, too, am not uninterested." Hermione looked particularly pleased at the thought.

"Would I lose you?" he asked Hermione quite seriously.

"Making love to her will not lose me as a friend or a girlfriend, Harry. A bit hypocritical to want to be sandwiched between you and Ron someday, and then tell you you can't be with another girl."

"We may wish a menage a quatre sometime soon zen," Fleur breathed. "None of you are unpleasant on ze eyes."

"You'd still ... you know that I love you, Hermione, as best I know the feeling."

She hugged him. "Perhaps tomorrow night I'll find a way to show you exactly what the images in my head are doing to me," she whispered. "You'll enjoy it no matter what."

"Can I assume that Ron is going to be a happy man in the morning?" he asked with a wide grin, equally as quietly.

"Perhaps not all the way, but I think he'd certainly like to show his appreciation for my robes," she said. "Would it bother you if Ron was my first?"

"No," he said, kissing her cheek. "We both love you, and I am not going to be hurt by it." He nibbled her ear quickly. "And someday I'd also like to be part of the 'both loving you'."

She grinned widely and finally released Harry, who turned to Fleur. Before Harry could say anything, Ron said, "He's crumbling, Miss. Drag him off and have your way with him."

"I zink I shall, zen," Fleur laughed brightly, and then gently dragged Harry away from the atrium for a final few dances while Ron and Hermione settled in for some gentle kisses in the atrium.

A short time later they were walking toward the carriage that was housing the students from Beauxbatons. She was shivering slightly, even through the heavy fur cloak she was wearing. As soon as they were inside her room, Harry quickly discovered that it had not been the cold that had been making her shiver. She turned to face him and pulled him tightly to her, her mouth hungrily trying to devour him, and her body pressing tightly against him.

When she came up for air, Harry suddenly discovered that he had managed to undo part of her gown, and had her breasts cupped in his hands. He gulped and started to remove them, but she moved quickly and held his hands there. "If I 'ad not wanted zem zair, I would 'ave stopped you some time ago, 'Arry." He smiled and captured her nipples between thumb and forefinger, drawing a delighted moan from the girl. "Yes-s-s-s-s," she hissed.

Thank God for this last summer, and the experimentation I got to do with Hermione and Ginny at the Burrow and at the Hogsmeade house,

he thought as he brought his mouth down to her chest, gently capturing one of the straining nipples in his mouth. As he began to tease it with suction and tongue, making her squeak and squeal in delight, he let his hands roam, to try to divest her of her robes, and was astonished by how successful he was when it suddenly released and fell to the floor, leaving Fleur in nothing but a very tiny pair of knickers.

“Magic 'ands, 'Arry,” she breathed. “Now it is my turn to undress you.” He wasn't sure where she'd kept her wand, but it was in her hand. A moment later, his clothes were on the floor, neatly folded, and he was nude. “Would you care to remove ze last of my clothing, 'Arry?” she asked in a voice that made even more blood try to be below his waist. “I zink ze answer is yes, from zat reaction,” she giggled.

Those were the last coherent words spoken that night by either of them.

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Harry awoke to something tickling his nose. He reached up to brush whatever it was away, but found his hand grabbed and placed back on the very soft place he now realised it had been before. “I like your 'ands on my breasts,” Fleur was saying.

He lay in bed with her, stunned, and then a huge grin washed across his face. “It wasn't a dream!” he whispered. “It really happened!”

She rolled over, pressing her bare breasts against his chest. “Yes, 'Arry, we made love last night. Not to inflate your ... 'ow you say ... ego, but you were quite special. Zank you for making my first time so wonderful.”

“I was your first? You were mine.” She kissed him sweetly, and his body suddenly became awake enough to realise that they were still dressed as they weren't last night, so he reacted.

“Mmm, I may not 'ave inflated your ego, but somezing else seems to 'ave inflated. I will 'elp you wiz it – gladly,” she purred, and pushed him onto his back. Once again, actions spoke far louder than words ever could.

They finally managed to get dressed after sharing a quick shower together – he reacted, and they reacted, and fun was again had by both – sated and happy, Harry escorted Fleur up to the castle for whichever meal was next in the day.

They were met by Malfoy and his goons. “Y’know Potter, some people have more than one set of good robes. Maybe you’re taking the Weasel lesson too much to heart?”

“You may be right, Parkinson,” Harry replied with a jaunty wave as they passed. “Who knows?” A second later, there was a squeal, and Fleur was yanked away from Harry by the single celled organisms known as Crabbe and Goyle. Harry went for his wand, but found quickly that he didn’t need it, because Fleur proved that certain Veela characteristics breed true. She began to morph, her face becoming much more bird-like, and her feet turned into talons, making her shoes pop off her feet. It was when fire began to glow at her fingertips that he said, “You guys might want to run. You can survive a fireball easier when it’s not right on top of you.” Surprisingly they took him at his word, and exploded down the hall, while Harry did the craziest thing he had ever done in his life – interposed himself between her and them and pulled her into an embrace. He could hear her heavy breathing, which slowed and then calmed completely. He looked at her again and saw that her face was back to its normal flawless beauty.

“Zank you, 'Arry. Ze incident from me killing zem could 'ave caused you some problems.” She shuddered against him. “Zat was terribly brave. A Veela is dangerous when in ze ... what you say ... zone.”

“I didn’t want you in trouble. It wasn’t brave, though. It was my personal brand of stupidity masking as bravery. What kind of an idiot interposes himself between an angry Veela about to spit fireballs and her targets?”

“You,” Ron said with a laugh as a small group of Gryffindors came up to them. He looked at what Harry was wearing and grinned. “I’ll ask how your night was after I ask what Malfoy and his idiots were doing to make Miss Delacour angry enough.”

“Being themselves, what else?” Seamus asked. “Tell you what, since it looks like Harry here needs to get out of those clothes ...”

“... again ...” Fleur said with a knowing grin.

“... again, let's all go up to the Tower, and then we can get some breakfast.” They walked on to the Gryffindor portrait, someone having been smart enough to run ahead and open it for them so that Fleur would not hear the password.

He came back downstairs fairly quickly to the sound of laughter. “You must have told them about my love-making skills, judging by the laughter,” he quipped with a wide grin.

“Zey would be worshipping at your feet if I 'ad told zem about zat,” Fleur said with an answering smile. This was met with raised eyebrows from the males, and a few speculative looks from the ladies.

“Thanks, Fleur, but there's no need to lie to them. Let's go on down for some breakfast – how does that sound?”

“It sounds wonderful,” she said. “We certainly worked up an appetite out zair.” The group walked happily to the great Hall and had breakfast, with Fleur and Harry both astonishing people with how much food ended up on their plates.

“Hungry much?” Sirius asked with a laugh as he walked by.

“Just a little, Dad,” Harry replied after swallowing the last of a bacon sandwich.

“Looks like you enjoyed yourself at the Ball last night. Was there a girl you *didn't* dance with?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Pansy Parkinson. She looked like something out of those Quality Confections boxes, and I couldn't have dreamed of dancing with her without laughing.”

“You have contemplated dancing with her otherwise?” Ron asked in shock.

"Sure, why not? It's not like it would be a proposal of marriage unless we were doing a tango, and I sure as hell have different people in mind to tango with. I danced with Millicent last night, in case you didn't see."

"You traitor!" Seamus said with a laugh. "How dare you listen to the suggestions that we all work together!" Harry just shook his head and chuckled, and the meal went on happily.

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The rest of the break was quiet, and soon everyone had returned to school to prepare for classes. Soon, January was nearly gone, February was fast approaching, and Hermione was pestering him about the egg. He had tried a number of times to hear what was being said, but it was too soft to be heard without getting close to the egg. He had ended up in the infirmary more than once with heat related injuries, including one burn as bad as the one Cedric had received from his dragon. He had even tried to submerge it in a large tub of water, which had boiled away almost immediately.

"I can tell where the other champions have been, because there are these patches of grass visible," he complained to Hermione one day as they sat in the Great Hall during homework club. "Not cold enough, apparently, because they're all still looking around with some serious annoyance in their eyes, and what look like sunburns."

"Well, we ... I mean you apparently need to find somewhere cold enough, to find a way to listen to what it's saying," Hermione said.

Lily came over to them, being the professor in charge today. "Are you two working on homework?" she asked archly.

"Yes and no, Professor Evans," Harry said. "I've gotten my other work done, and I'm trying to figure out a method of solving the puzzle of the egg. Everything I've done so far has been terribly obvious, I guess, and subtlety in puzzle solving is not my cup of tea. A large mallet is my preferred puzzle solving tool."

"Right," Hermione said sceptically. "This from the man who figured out how to de-knicker every girl in the Gryffindor dormitories." At Lily's

raised eyebrows, she elaborated. "Third year prank of his. One of the annoying seventh years last year said that the day that he got her out of her knickers would be the day she'd walk naked out of the Great Hall. She apparently put enough emotion into it to make it a magical contract of sorts."

Lily snorted softly. "You were the reason Verbena Vane walked starkers out of dinner that night?"

He blushed and shrugged. "I've sworn to Hermione and the other girls that getting them all was an accident, but I'm not sure that they believe me."

"It was funny to see him standing there with close to fifty pairs of knickers hanging off his arm," Hermione said. "His look for that moment was priceless. It was worth the moment of extreme surprise."

"You'd been thinking about the other girls being naked, hadn't you?" Lily asked, and was answered by a deepening of his blush. "That set your parameters too wide. You needed to narrow them."

Harry looked up at his mother for a moment with a stunned look. "Please ask Dad to give you an extra big kiss tonight, Mum. I think you've just solved my problem." He paused. "Well, one of them. Now I have to work on my Conjunction."

"What are you thinking?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"I'll explain later, when we're alone. I don't want extra ears listening in and stealing my idea." He turned back to his books and tried to look busy.

Later, when it was just the Gryffindor group, he said, "My problem is the environment. I'm trying to get the environment to cool it down. I need to create something extremely cold in the egg, once it's opened. While the whatever is being warmed by the egg, I can listen to the message."

Sienna leapt across the table and hugged her brother. "Don't take this wrong, but ..." and she kissed his cheek. "That's brilliant!"

He hugged her. "Have I told you recently that I'm glad you're my sister?" He looked to James. "You're not left out of this either, kiddo. Even though I don't say it enough, I'm glad that you're my brother."

The group then began to work on Harry's conjuration skills. It wasn't until the challenge was a week away that he finally got his skill to work consistently.

He headed out into some of the wide open spaces on the school campus with a small group and set the egg down. Motioning them back, he opened the egg and ran away to meet them. With a smile, he pointed his wand at the egg and said, "*Conjurus!*" Something liquid materialised above the egg and fell toward it.

The explosion was heard for miles.

Chapter 11

"What the great bloody hell did you do?" Hermione shrieked when the last of the dirt and stone had stopped raining down upon them.

"Tried to cool it down," he said quietly. She had taken to swearing, something beyond the pale for her – it was best, he felt, to be straight-forward and simple in his answers.

"Using what?" she screamed. "Liquid oxygen?" When she saw him biting his lower lip and refusing to speak, she went silent for a moment. "Harry," she finally continued with her voice at a dangerously normal level, "please tell me that you were not so *monumentally stupid* as to use *ROCKET FUEL* as a cooling agent!"

"Am I permitted to lie to you when I tell you?" he asked with a weak smile.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Harry," she said quietly, "I love you very much. So please understand that when I beat you unconscious in a few minutes, I do it only out of love and a desire to leave the school and this part of Scotland standing." She lurched forward and threw her arms around him and began to cry, shivering heavily against him. "You scared me, Harry! You were the closest and I saw this flash of white and heard the explosion and then you went 'Oof!' and things were falling out of the sky and some of them were warm and sort of sticky feeling and -"

Harry silenced her by lifting her face and starting to kiss her. "I'm sorry," he said after the kiss broke. "I wasn't thinking, and I shortened a hill here by several feet apparently. Likely destroyed my egg, too." He waved his wand. "*Accio* egg." There was no sign of a golden egg flying toward them. "I never meant to scare you."

They walked to the rather impressive crater left behind and looked down. As they did, they heard a commotion and saw several people running toward them. In the lead, most surprisingly, was the Headmaster, his robes pulled up and his pasty white but surprisingly muscular legs pumping for all they were worth to reach them.

"What has happened?" he asked when he arrived on the scene. "Was anyone hurt?"

Harry shrank. "No one is hurt, sir. As for what happened, I was an idiot."

"No surprise there," grumbled Snape as he arrived. No one was surprised to see Lily smack the back of his head perhaps harder than she should have.

Dumbledore chose to ignore the interplay. "What precisely happened?"

"I was attempting to cool the egg, rather than the environment. The choice of material with which to do this was less than perfect. I chose liquid oxygen."

Many of the people who had shown up were puzzled, but a few of them reacted strongly. "Now do you see why I insist that this ... boy," he said, distaste and even venom dropping from his voice, "should be expelled? He routinely does dangerous things at this school, and now he goes so far as to attempt to blow up the entire facility." He turned to Harry and said, "An important safety tip for you, *Potter* – air burns. You might remember that some time and prevent fatalities. How you managed to think of doing this thing away from the castle is beyond me, given your minuscule intellect." He paused. "It was probably the mudblood's thinking that saved us all," he murmured.

Harry heard it, and launched himself at the Potions professor, managing a good strike to the face, breaking the man's nose, in fact. He was thrown a moment later, landing hard, but rolling to his feet. "Sectumsempra!" Snape yelled, and a gash appeared on Harry's face, cutting his left cheek. "Sectumsempra!" he shouted again, and this time the gash appeared across Harry's chin on the right side. Had it been two inches lower, it likely would have sliced cleanly through his jugular vein. Severus never had the chance to say it a third time, because James Potter had rather soundly impacted the side of his hand with Snape's neck, making the man gag.

"Do that again, Snivellus, and you won't survive to do it again," Potter said. "We do not use transfiguration to discipline, nor do we attack a

student with magic.” He paused. “As for his provocation for attacking you, considering that you insulted not only his girlfriend but also his mother, I can't say as I'm terribly surprised that he chose to attempt to rearrange your face. I know I did once in school when you said the same thing to Lily.”

“Gentlemen, please,” Dumbledore said. “We shall deal with this later.”

“No!” Snape finally said. “We will deal with this now! *Potter* has been allowed to break the rules at this school from his very first day within its walls! He throws a tantrum and the entire Sorting stops! He gets weepy for the fact that everyone finally treats him as he deserves when they discover that he is a parselmouth, and the school rolls over and does his bidding! For doing nothing whatsoever, he receives a fortune when those who did the actual work split the remaining money! He is coddled when his name erupts from the Goblet, and when he destroys a priceless artefact, *nothing is done*. And now he assaults a teacher, and will get away with it, I am certain. The Board of Governors will hear of this, I assure you.”

“Yes, they should,” Lily said coldly. “Let them hear how you insulted a student, within that student's hearing, with a vile and disgusting, not to mention bigoted epithet. Let them hear about your continual verbal assaults on the Gryffindor students. Let them hear how you responded to a purely physical assault with a magical one that certainly appears to have been an attempt on a student's life.”

Sirius walked up to him, wand pressed deeply into the Potions Master's cheek. “And would you mind telling me how you expected to even find the basilisk skin that we all made money on? As far as I know, there is only one parselmouth that speaks it fluently, and at the time, the only one who could have opened the entry at all. A number of other students now speak it, thanks to that worthless boy, as you seem to think of him. And by the way, Snivellus? If you ever strike my son again, either physically or magically, I will kill you. I'm damned close to casting a Blasting Curse at this very moment, but I won't hurt Harry by going to Azkaban.”

More words were about to be exchanged when a slight rumbling came from the crater, and suddenly something shot into the air. It

arced toward Harry, and with his Seeker's reflexes, he reached out and caught the heavy item, which knocked him back a step or two. Brushing the dirt off, he realised that it was his egg, and it was apparently unharmed. "Damn! This thing is *tough!*"

Madam Pomfrey, who had just finished sealing Harry's wounds and doing what healing she could, scowled at Severus before speaking. "I swore an oath not to harm, Severus. What you have done here today in my presence sorely tests that oath. I would have frowned on a fistfight, but I could possibly have understood it. However, using a spell such as that one is unforgivable, and do not think that I will not speak entirely separately with the Governors. The gash on his cheek went completely through, Severus. He could have poked his tongue out through that wound." She turned to Dumbledore. "You know my feelings, Albus, but I will tell you this – if Severus is still working here by the end of the day, then you will be receiving my resignation."

Dumbledore sighed. "May we please continue this conversation in a more secure area? There are far too many ears at the moment, and I feel that this discussion would do best to be finished away from prying ears and eyes."

"Do you need me, sir?" Harry asked. "I want to continue trying to figure this thing out, and I don't think that sitting in your office, trying to figure out a valid reason to keep him here while keeping everyone else here is in my best interests. I trust Mum and Dad to look after those interests." He paused, and then directed a stream of water into his mouth, which he swirled around and spit out, leaving a reddish stain in the snow. "Blech. I hate the taste of blood."

"And how have you learned what it taste like?" Lily asked somewhat dangerously.

"Mum, I play Quidditch," he replied, his voice taking on a slightly petulant tone against his will.

She nodded her understanding and then turned to Dumbledore. "Shall we move this conversation to your office?"

"I want to see you in the hospital wing before the day is out, Mr. Black," Madam Pomfrey said. "Unless I miss my guess, your

girlfriends are not going to want to see those scars on your face.” Hermione nodded in agreement, and so did Sienna, oddly enough.

“I promise,” he replied with a smile, feeling the scar that currently existed pulling slightly as the skin stretched. “I rather like looking in the mirror and not seeing scars.” Madam Pomfrey nodded and the majority of the teachers left, leaving only Peter behind.

“Thought it might be a good idea to have some sort of teaching presence here after that first explosion,” he explained with a shrug.

“Can't say as I'll complain,” Harry replied. “Well, back to the egg.” He walked a distance away, putting it down again and opening it. He started to run, and then turned back to it, stopping much closer to it than he was able to before. He cocked his head to listen, and then grimaced. He pointed his wand at the egg again, and this time a block of some steaming substance fell from above the egg.

As soon as it hit the egg, smoke appeared to roil out of the open egg. Harry stepped closer to it and suddenly grinned. Picking the open egg up, he listened, nodding occasionally. As the last of the smoke disappeared, he grinned and closed the egg. Out of curiosity, he reopened the egg and held his hand over the opening, and then reached inside. “Huh, either I solved the problem, or I burned out its ability to heat the area.” He closed it and then walked over to them, opening the egg again once he was near them. Sibilant words came out in English for all to hear.

Come seek us where our words do hiss,

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to seek,

But past an hour – the prospect's bleak.

“Okay, so something that means a lot to me will be stolen from me. I just need to figure out where it will be taken, so that I can get it back.” He scowled. “I'm bothered, though. I thought that I could hear other voices in the background, speaking parseltongue, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I don't think that it was anything good,

though. It made me nervous.” He turned and started to walk to the school.

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He spent the next few days before the challenge in the library, studying creatures. It was only the day before the challenge when he remembered the obvious. “Professor Hagrid,” he said, drawing a smile from the giant of a man. “I need some suggestions as to where to direct my studies, and I’m ashamed to admit that I was so focused that I never thought to ask an expert.”

“At’s all right, ‘Arry,” the big man rumbled. “You got lots on yer plate right now. What kin I ‘elp ya wit’?”

“Well, I’m looking for a creature that is definitely snake-like, can speak English, and likes either extreme heat or extreme cold. Given the affinity for snakes that the clue gave, I’m assuming heat.”

Hagrid thought for a while. “I can’t rightly say, bein’ a perfessor an’ all, but I think ya might want ta talk ta yer fellow Gryffindor – that Indian girl, Patil. I’m bettin’ she can give ya a couple hints.”

“Thanks, Hagrid,” Harry said brightly. “You’re a great friend.” He took off for the castle again and waited around for Parvati.

“Harry!” she said with no little surprise. “What brings you to the foot of the girl’s dormitory stairs?”

“Other than the fondest wish of every male – to be allowed into the sanctum of incredible beauty?” He smiled as she blushed prettily, and tried to ignore that it spread past her face and into her cleavage. “I was working on solving a problem for the challenge, and I was informed by Professor Hagrid that you would be the best to help me out, since I think the professors are still forbidden to give blatant help to the students.”

She looked at him for a moment. “I want to go upstairs and get comfortable for a while.”

“Okay, I can wait down here,” Harry said with a smile.

She looked around the room, as did Harry. He was puzzled to see the girls in the common room nodding. It registered on him that he was the only male in the room at the moment. "Harry," she said, "do you see that off-colour stone that's even with the fifth step?" He looked, and nodded. It wasn't ridiculously obvious, but if you had it pointed out to you, you could see it. "If you stand on that step, place your hand on the stone and say 'Excelsior', it will let you all the way up."

He blinked at her for a moment, and then looked at the other girls. Standing straight, he met their eyes one by one before saying, "I swear to you that no other males will learn of this from me if I can help it, without your permission." A brief blue glow surrounded him, and the girls all sighed.

"And you just proved why we were willing to do that, Harry. You didn't need to do the oath."

"Yes I did. You gave me something very precious – your trust – and I wanted you to know that I will not abuse it."

She smiled a smile that spoke volumes about how she felt about him and his actions. "Follow me up, Harry. You need to talk, and I need to get out of these damned robes for a little while." She walked up the stairs, and Harry couldn't help but notice the little extra wiggle in her hips as she climbed.

He followed her up the stairs, and followed her into the room. He knew immediately which one was Hermione's, based on the books on the night stand. He looked over toward Parvati and saw her facing away from him, lowering the heavy robes off her shoulders.

Her bare shoulders.

Which led to an equally bare back.

He spun so fast that it made him dizzy, and he looked to make sure that there were no mirrors anywhere that would allow him to watch her, no matter how much he wanted to. He even closed his eyes for good measure.

"Harry?" she asked a moment later, amusement in her voice. He turned to face her, eyes still tightly shut. "Oh, Harry," she said fondly. "You can open your eyes. I've got *them* covered again."

He opened his eyes carefully to find that she was now wearing a very soft looking sweater that hugged her curves. It was a shade of magenta that he would have sworn was not a good colour for anyone, but it suited her absolutely perfectly. He also noticed that she was not wearing a skirt. *Thank God she's got knickers on, or I'd never be able to think.*

"Y'think maybe a skirt would do you some good?" he asked, looking away. "It would certainly be good for me."

"Don't you like my legs?" she asked, sounding a little hurt.

He grinned for just a moment as one answer came to mind, but he decided not to say it, since he didn't fancy drinking any potions to regrow his teeth. He wiped the grin and answered, "Parvati, your legs and the sight of your beautiful back makes me want to be unfaithful to Hermione and Ginny and Fleur with you. You are a remarkably sexy woman, and I'll even admit that you've been in my thoughts a few times, if you catch my meaning. But I'll not cheat on Hermione or the others."

"Harry, you continue to prove that you are the Gryffindor's Gryffindor. If you came over and tore my clothes off my body and forced me back onto the bed, you'd get no fight. Hell, you'd get my help. I want you, I won't deny that. But even though Hermione and I aren't on the best of terms, I won't dishonour her by trying to seduce you. Too much."

"Why aren't you on good terms?" he asked, curious.

"I don't know. She's a really nice girl, and I think she's sexy as anything, but she won't even give me the time of day most of the time. I guess we don't mesh very well."

"So you notice that girls are nice to look at too, am I right?" She blushed furiously. "Climb into bed with her some night and say 'Harry sent me', Parvati. You might want to be naked first, though." At the

Indian girl's confused look, he simply said, "The feelings are mutual, Parvati. She'll likely hate me for saying it to you, but I think she enjoys looking at you undressing as much as I'll bet you enjoy watching her."

Parvati bounced happily on her bed, and Harry was suddenly aware that she wasn't wearing a bra. He shook his head and dragged his eyes away from the way that she was pointing at him without benefit of hands. "I came up here because Hagrid suggested I talk to you. I need to know what kind of a creature speaks snake language and English and enjoys hot areas, based on the snake side of the equation. It also would likely be something that you or your sister would know something about."

She slid backward on her bed until she could lean against her bed's headboard. Her eyes unfocused and she began to scowl, obviously deep in thought. Suddenly her eyes went wide, and he saw all the colour drain from her face. "Oh, Merlin," she breathed. "Can I hear the egg? No, it's still spewing out that heat, isn't it?"

"*Accio* egg," he said. "I managed to either break the heat spell or use it up." There was a knock on the door, and Harry chuckled. "My egg knocks when it wants to enter a room?" He opened the door to find Hermione there, holding the egg. He could tell the moment her eyes hit Parvati, because he watched her pupils dilate.

"Thanks, beautiful," he said. "Want to come in and listen to the rhyme again?" She nodded absently. He leaned forward. "After we listen to it, I'll leave you two alone. You might want to get really comfortable around each other, you know?" he whispered in her ear. She looked at him with a question in her eyes. "I told her," he said simply.

"You what?" Hermione asked, her eyes full of hurt. "Without my permission?"

"He did the right thing, Hermione," Parvati said from behind him. "I'll explain later, when I'm wearing less clothes, but right now I want to hear the egg. I do not like what I'm thinking right now."

Hermione was simply blinking for several seconds, before undoing her robe and placing it on her bed. Harry turned to Parvati and

opened the egg, replaying the rhyme for her. She nearly fainted when she heard it.

She shook slightly as she started to speak. "Harry, you'll be facing Naga, wherever you are. I don't know what the Muggle literature says about them, but I'm betting it's completely wrong. The only Naga ever seen are female, and are said to be excruciatingly beautiful in appearance. They look human from the waist up, and from there down they are a gigantic snake. They can be any skin colour you can imagine, the human tones up through any of the snake tones. They're fighters beyond compare. Indian history talks of a group of fifty fighting off a wizarding army of two thousand. Not a wizard survived, and the Naga were said to have at least half their number still in fighting condition." She grimaced. "Forty to one odds strike me as a bit much. I'm betting that they aren't *that* good, but they are known for their warfare."

She frowned. "They aren't native to the area, so they must have been imported to the area for the challenge. We need somewhere very warm. Near the school. There's something else I have a problem with about this, but I really can't think of it now. Despite what it sounds like, Indian creatures aren't my big thing."

"Are there caverns in the area?" he asked. "Nothing I'm aware of is above ground, so maybe where they are is under the ground."

"This area is rife with caves," Hermione said. "I wouldn't be surprised to find that they have caverns around as well."

"It's off to the library for me, then," Harry said, getting to his feet. "I'll see you ladies at dinner?"

"We'll help!" a nervous Hermione said, jumping to her feet. "I mean, I'll help – I wouldn't speak for Parvati. I mean, uh -"

"I think the two of you need to have a long awaited conversation," Harry said with a smile. "With the incredible help that Parvati just gave me, I think I can find something in the library." He walked over to Parvati, took her hand and kissed it. "Thank you, beautiful lady." He turned and walked out of the room and headed for the stairs. Before he could reach them, Hermione popped her head out the door.

"Put your hand on the bannister and say 'Descend' to keep the stair alarm turned off."

He re-entered the common room, startling several of the girls, and one of the boys who had shown up. "Over so soon?" one of the girls asked with a sly grin on her face. "I thought you had more staying power."

"I left before I could be convinced to stay," he replied seriously. "One beautiful woman alone is tempting. Two of them? I wouldn't stand a chance. So I left."

"You are either dead meat," Alicia said with a smile, "or will be remembering their thank you years from now. Where are you heading to?"

"The library again. Parvati helped me figure out what I'm facing. Now I need to know exactly where I'm looking."

He was en route to the library when he came across his mother and Sirius. "Professors!" he called, startling them. "Sorry to bother you, and I'll understand if you can't answer me properly, but are there any caves or caverns in the area?"

"Figured out your clue, have you?" Sirius asked with a grin. "The answer is yes. There are caverns and caves in the area large enough for what they needed for the challenge, outside Hogsmeade. Since you know, you'll be taken to them tomorrow when the challenge is about to start."

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The next morning at breakfast, he noticed that there appeared to be no sign of Hermione at breakfast. He began to get a little worried, since he hadn't seen her since the night before. Parvati had a delighted smile on her face, and had kissed Harry on the lips. "I have her permission, Harry. We'll talk later. But thank you for last night."

He stood and walked to the head table, ignoring the presence of Severus Snape, who had somehow managed to avoid getting fired.

"Sir?" he asked the Headmaster. "I'm a little worried. I can't find Hermione anywhere, and she'd never miss this."

"She is safe, Harry," Albus Dumbledore replied. "I guarantee that she is in no danger. She was called away for something important, because she was honestly best suited for the job. She will be at the second task as soon as it is feasible for her to be."

Harry nodded and returned to the table. All too soon he was being tapped on the shoulder by the Headmaster, and led to a carriage, which held the other three champions. "Arry!" Fleur exclaimed, worry evident in her voice. "Gabrielle is missing, and zey will not let me look for 'er because of zis tournament!"

He looked to Cedric. "Cho's missing too, isn't she?" He simply nodded once in consternation. "Well, that answers what they meant in the clue. Each of us has someone we'd miss in hiding where we're going. We probably have to go in and find them." They all looked at him with varying degrees of comprehension. "Did anyone not get their egg open and listened to?" None of them admitted to such, if it was the case. "So you know that we have an hour to find them and get back out. Where we go from there is anyone's guess."

The rest of the trip was silent.

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"Last night, something important was taken from each of our champions, and they must now retrieve it. Within these caves they will find that which was taken from them." Albus Dumbledore said, looking out at the group. "Well, it appears that all our champions are ready for the second task. So, when I set off the Cannon Blast Charm, the task shall begin. One ... two ... three -" When he reached three, he raised his wand into the air and released a thunderous blast from it.

Harry didn't even bother to look at the others, although he could see them immediately begin to spread out. He looked around the area, looking for an outpouring of heat, since there had to be somewhere that the intense heat would vent. He found one and took off – away from the other competitors, it turned out. He was fairly certain that the

smaller of the two that he saw was an actual vent, but he vowed to check it out if the first didn't pan out.

He approached the area and was pleased to see that it appeared to be large enough for him. Upon closer inspection, he decided that this was the area that they were likely expected to enter. *I wonder if that Horntail could fit through there – it certainly looks like it.*

He entered the cavernous opening and walked carefully forward until the outside light was no longer offering him enough to see by. “*Visium Nocturnus*,” he murmured as he touched his face with the tip of his wand. Suddenly the caves were as bright as the outdoors to him.

He looked at his watch and realised that he had already used ten of his sixty minutes. He began to speed up his search somewhat, scrambling over rock and other obstacles. The going was tough, because the caverns were hot and humid, either naturally or by magical design. Either way, they were slowing him down as well.

He had been walking for another ten minutes when he finally heard voices. Hissing voices. He hid behind a large stone to listen. “The girl is nearly dead. Shortly, the world will be less one Veela, and when the sister arrives, we shall make it two.” He could tell that the voice was speaking parseltongue, and he felt his blood boiling. He stood carefully and saw the speakers.

They were as Parvati had said – half snake and half human. He had to admit that the human half was certainly attractive, and they certainly filled out their armour quite well. There were five of them, all carrying staves topped with flared cobra heads. Their skin was a golden colour – not Asian in appearance, but much closer to the metal.

He exploded from around the boulder, firing as he moved. He managed to catch one solidly in the chest, and was somewhat surprised as his Blasting Curse bounced off her armour. The victim of his blast pointed her cobra-headed staff at him and fired something. He barely got a shield up in time. As it was, whatever it was deflected off and knocked down a few stalactites.

“Why do you attack us, champion?” the staff wielding Naga asked with a silky sibilance. “We are doing what your people asked.”

“What, murdering the Veela?” he asked her in parseltongue.

There were five hisses, and suddenly spells were flying. He wasn't sure why none of them were able to hit him, but he certainly wasn't complaining. He started Banishing rocks at them, and surprised himself when he Banished a small one, barely bigger than a pebble, hard and fast enough to go through the Naga's armour. He heard her gag, and she crumpled to the ground in a heap, blood trickling from her mouth.

“You shall die for that, Uplander!” one of them hissed furiously.

“Yeah, I've heard that before,” he replied, feigning a yawn before Summoning a rock from behind the speaker. He was astonished to watch her head go away as the rock came by and powdered on the boulder he was hiding behind. *Damn!*

He noticed two other champions entering via another entrance, one by one, and redoubled his attack to keep the Naga from noticing the other champions. Victor simply collected the girl he had been sent in after and left. Cedric saw the condition that Gabrielle was in and started to move to Harry, but turned to look at Gabrielle again. He went white and began to work on Gabrielle instead.

As Cedric worked on Gabrielle, Fleur entered the cavern. She took one look at the situation and began to change, the Veela finally coming completely to the fore. In short order, Harry was ducking fireballs as well as Naga blasts, but they were also being forced to split their attentions as well. He decided to do something very dangerous. He needed something cold – very cold.

From behind the boulder, he concentrated and then created the largest pool of liquid oxygen that he could over the heads of the Naga, chosen simply because it needed to be liquid, and because he had done it before. The unholy screams of the Naga as the blisteringly cold liquid struck them shook him to the core, but the shock was replaced with sheer terror when he saw Fleur's hands begin to glow

again, and he stared in disbelieving shock as he saw the fireball heading in his direction.

He wasn't sure how, but he and the other champions and their hostages all appeared in the bright sunlight about five seconds before a gout of flame exploded from every single opening into the mountain. He proceeded to collapse, but not before releasing his own unholy scream, since the Night Vision spell was still active on him.

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He awoke in the hospital wing. He couldn't see a thing, and it took him several seconds to realise that his eyes were bound. As were his hands. Something seemed to be coating his face as well. "Hello? Is anyone there?" he asked. Well, that was what he had intended. What it actually sounded like to his own ears was, "Arglemsck!"

"Harry, you're awake!" he heard his mother say.

"Glermf," he responded.

He could hear her stifle a chuckle before she called for Madam Pomfrey, who he could hear bustle over. She murmured a few spells before slowly setting about unwrapping his eyes. Finally, he could see again, and smiled up into the face of the school's Healer. "Have I ever told you that you're beautiful?" he asked her with a grin on his face.

She got a wry look on her face and looked to Lily. "Blow to the head, I'm sure. Boy's delirious." She smiled at the end of her statement, though.

"I woke up blind. Of course I'm going to think the first thing I see is beautiful," he said, getting into the 'game'. "Of course, that means I would have thought Fluffy was beautiful if it had been him." He shuddered and then became serious. "To be honest, ma'am, I want to thank you for whatever you've done for me this time. I'm in here just enough to have you be able to call me by my first name, it seems, and I never thank you for what you do. I have the sneaking suspicion that you've literally saved my life this time. Thank you."

She smiled. "I didn't save your life, but I healed your burns. I don't need any more thanks than that, Mr. Potter." She set to unwrapping his hands, then checked his face again. "The burns on your face are almost healed, and the cream will fade away when they are healed. It's almost gone as it is." She smiled again and headed back into her office, murmuring something about idiots who set up potentially fatal challenges.

He looked around to see his mother and all the Marauders standing there. James was fighting a battle within himself, that much was obvious. "I don't know how you did it," he finally said, "but it's been verified that you were the reason that all six of you survived. The magic radiated from you and caught them. Congratulations." He smiled at Harry, surprising him with how sincere it was.

The others smiled as well. "They were waiting for you to awaken before announcing the scores," Sirius said. "I don't care how you did, though. You're a hero."

"You're also the instigator of an international incident," a voice called out as they entered the wing. Cornelius Fudge bustled into the room with his lime green bowler under his arm and six Aurors as bodyguards. One of them was female with pink hair. She looked at him and winked. "And the murderer of the five Naga in the caverns."

Harry looked coldly at the Minister for Magic. "So it would have been better to allow them to murder one of the champions and the hostage that they had? Mind you, I had been told that the hostages were safe, so who lied? Was it the Headmaster or the people who told him?"

"Had I been informed as to what the challenge was, I would have put a stop to it," Albus Dumbledore said as he breezed into the room. "Naga and Veela are ancient enemies."

"Dumbledore, he killed all five of the Naga! The Indian Ministry is in a fury over this!"

"Let me talk to them," Harry growled. "If you want an international incident, let me at least earn the damned thing."

Sirius snorted. "That's my boy," he murmured proudly.

"Listen to the boy!" Fudge was yelling. "He's trying to start something with the other nations! He's a danger!"

"I walked into the cavern and heard the Naga bragging amongst themselves about how close to death Gabrielle was," Harry said, sounding far more calm than he actually felt, "and how much they were looking forward to dealing with Fleur. Now, as far as I'd been told, all the hostages were safe, although at the time I had been told it, I was merely told that Hermione was safe. She, I assume, was my hostage – I never got close enough to see her. Krum, on the other hand, got a chance to look at everyone, and see me fighting the Naga, and simply left with his hostage."

"As you should have done!" Fudge bellowed.

Harry looked at him for a long moment. "Slytherin. Your House must have been Slytherin. We Gryffindors would do something similar to what I did. A Hufflepuff would do as Cedric did. A Ravenclaw would have looked at the situation and logically chosen to help Gabrielle, as Cedric did. Only the Slytherin would look at it, figure out the political angle, and let someone die because of it." He met the Minister's eyes angrily.

"Something must be done," Fudge said in a dangerous voice. "Until this situation has cleared up, you will be sent to Azkaban to await your trial."

The result of this statement was deafening, and only stopped when the Aurors drew their wands. Two of the Aurors obviously did not have their hearts in it, however – the one who had winked at Harry, and the large bald black man next to her. "Mr. Black will be going to a cell in Azkaban for the duration of his wait for trial. End of statement," Fudge said smugly.

"I can already tell that it's going to happen, no matter what," Harry said sourly. "Please don't get into a fight with Ministry officials, Dad - no sense in there being multiple people going as well." Sirius started at the comment, and then lowered his wand with a frown. Harry looked to Fudge. "May I at least change into something a bit more relaxed for the wait in a cell? You can send a couple Aurors with me to watch me change, to make sure that I don't try anything weird." He

looked around. "Who has my wand?" Lily nodded, tears in her eyes. "Good." He looked to Fudge again. "May I? I understand that it gets cold out there in the North Atlantic."

"Very well," was the grudging answer. "Tonks? Shacklebolt? See to him." The two who had been showing reluctance stepped forward. Harry nodded and made his way to the door.

He opened it to face a number of people outside, Fleur being one of them. She leapt at him and kissed him quite thoroughly, making the blood rush through him to interesting places. "You have to kiss me like that right now?" he groaned.

"We can go back to ze carriage and take care of it," she said archly.

"No we can't," he replied. "I have to change clothes before Fudge has me sent to Azkaban to await trial for creating an international incident by killing the Naga. Apparently things would have been much easier to gloss over if I'd just let your sister and you die at their hands."

"You're joking, right mate?" Ron asked, his jaw in danger of dropping open wide enough to land a hippogryph in his mouth.

"Unfortunately, no," said Shacklebolt in a deep voice.

"Apparently even the Indian Ministry wants their pound of flesh for what happened," Harry said, shrugging. "I get thrown to the wolves as a sop." He walked past everyone else.

In the Gryffindor Tower, a rousing cheer erupted as soon as he came through the door, but it died quickly as they saw the Aurors beside him. "Anything I'm going to need while I'm there, Tonks, or will everything be taken except the clothes on my back?"

"The latter," she replied. "Azkaban was never meant to be a comfortable place."

"Okay," he said, rather enjoying the eruption of whispers through the common room area. "I'm going to go upstairs and put on some warm clothes."

"Need some help?" she asked with a leer.

"Might lose your job if you get caught snogging a prisoner, Auror Tonks," he laughed. He laughed even harder at the mock pout she gave him next.

"As you can tell," Shacklebolt said, "not all the Aurors agree with the ruling, but at the moment there is nothing we can do."

"Hey, Parvati?" Harry asked. When she looked up at him with her eyes red from crying, he continued. "If your father or mother have any connections within the Indian Ministry, I would appreciate it if you could get them to put a bug in someone's ear. Our Ministry has apparently decided that I should have let an innocent die." At her confused look, he said, "Fleur and Gabrielle are both Veela."

"That's what I was trying to remember!" she shouted. "What thrice-damned moron decided that a mortal enemy should be guarding a Veela?" she asked next, incredulous.

"Have to talk that over with the Ministry," he said. "I need to change and get going." He headed upstairs, the two Aurors following him. Once inside the room, he shivered. It had nothing to do with the temperature, however.

"I don't want to go," he said quietly. "What if they forget me in there?"

"Trust me, Harry, we won't let them," Tonks said, hugging him. "And do you really think that your Mum is going to forget that you exist?"

"She did when I was young," he said softly. He shrugged and then quickly undressed and redressed in significantly warmer clothing.

"You surprise me," Shacklebolt said. "Most young men your age wouldn't change clothes with a woman in the room."

"I've got too much other crap to worry about being naked in front of someone who isn't even interested in me in the first place," Harry said with a mirthless chuckle. "Could you lock my trunk for me? Key it to me I guess."

"Anyone else, while I'm at it?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Well, I can see Ron or Ginny or my parents needing to get in, so them too." Shacklebolt nodded and tapped the trunk, which glowed for just a moment. "Thanks. Well, shall we go?"

"You're in quite a hurry to get there," Tonks said.

"Not really. But given how Minister Fudge is reacting, if I delay much longer, he'll add new charges on when I make it to court." He walked downstairs and down to the entrance hall, where he met the Minister and the remainder of the Aurors.

"Your trial will be quite soon, Harry," Albus said. "You will be out of there in very short order."

"Now see here, Dumbledore!" Fudge exclaimed. "You can't go promising him a speedy trial! There's no telling how long it will take to get this set up!"

"You had best have your prosecution ready in the next twenty-four hours, Cornelius, because the trial will happen within that time period. As Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, you know that I have a say in such things. And make no mistake, he will be tried before the Wizengamot."

Fudge spluttered for a moment before he turned and stomped from the room. The four Aurors who Harry didn't know followed him closely. Tonks and Shacklebolt looked at each other, shrugged, and then followed the Minister, Harry walking in front of them.

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The portkey dropped Harry and four Aurors on a dark and dingy shore, where the fog lay, and a cold wind blew. It was the type of wind that Harry had once heard described by Seamus as a lazy wind – it couldn't be bothered to go around you, so instead it went right straight through you.

Harry didn't know any of these Aurors, and they seemed in no hurry to get to know Harry. They walked to the end of the dock and loaded

Harry into the waiting boat, which began to glide across the water immediately after all passengers were aboard and seated. The fog bank was thick and oppressive, and Harry could feel the dank and cold begin to seep into him already.

The reached the island and debarked. Harry began to feel a cold that sank deep into him; that was far beyond anything that the environment could be causing. Then he saw the reason. Two Dementors were gliding toward him, with two Aurors behind them.

He was led deep into the fortress prison, the weight of the Dementors power sapping his very will to fight. He tried to throw his Occlumency shields up, but they were ineffective at best. He could hear people talking.

"He's a Death Eater bastard. He'll turn on us some day, mark my words." Harry shook his head in denial as he heard his 'grandfather' speaking.

"I don't care, Lily – that boy is not my son." He could hear the refrain that had been repeated and had led to the divorce.

These led into darker memories – memories of being ignored by the entire family, save the house elves; memories of his sister taunting him; memories of wishing that he were dead, so that he wouldn't become what his parents swore he was destined to become. He could hear them and see them as if they were happening at that moment.

The Aurors were forced to place the nearly comatose boy in his cell.

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He wasn't sure how long he had been in the cell when his senses started to come back to him. There were four different Aurors outside waiting for him. "It's time to go, Mr. Black," one of them said.

He shook his head. "How long have I been here?" he asked. "Feels like days, with everything I was remembering."

"Twelve hours," the Auror answered. "We're here to take you to the Ministry."

He snorted. "Should be fun. I get to have a trial before Fudge finds a reason to put me back in here," he said. "Well, we must away, as they say. Shall we see about my farce of a trial?"

"Have you so little respect for Ministry laws?" another asked angrily.

"When they throw me in jail for trying to save two people's lives, yeah, I have amazingly little respect for those laws," Harry barked back in response. "Now let's get to London so that I can get back here before nightfall."

"Shut up you whiny little brat," a third Auror said.

"Just get me there, you Death Eater," Harry barked at the man. He was answered with a blinding pain in his neck as he felt the point of a wand actually pierce the skin of his throat. His response surprised all five of them – his hand shot up, grasped the shaft of the wand, and he twisted, making the pain even worse, but he heard a splintering crack. He then heard another one as something impacted the side of his skull.

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He awoke on the floor a few minutes later, bruised and battered. The first two Aurors had the other two at bay with their wands, and Albus Dumbledore leaned over Harry, with Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt once more in attendance. His chest felt as if he had broken ribs. "What happened?" he gasped out.

"Apparently, Mr. Wilson felt that your epithet deserved what he felt to be proper chastisement of an unarmed prisoner. His compatriot, Mr. Ridpath, also felt that potentially deadly assault upon your person was the proper avenue." He scowled. "We came because it was taking far too long for you to arrive for the trial. As it is, we cannot give you proper treatment as immediately as we would like, because this *has* become an international incident." He cast a few spells upon Harry, who gasped as his ribs complained while they were magically bound.

Harry stood and looked at the Headmaster. "Shall we go hear my preselected verdict, sir? Not that I'm in any rush to get back here, mind you."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Are you so certain that you will be convicted, Harry?"

"I've embarrassed Cornelius Fudge, sir. He was in a great thundering hurry to get me put in here as soon as I'd awakened. He didn't want the trial to happen this quickly. Trust me, sir – he's going to do everything he can to punish me. If he can legally get me sentenced here, he will."

"Would that I could argue with you, Harry," Dumbledore answered him. He held out a sheet of parchment. "It is a portkey to the Ministry," he explained. The pulling sensation behind Harry's navel began.

The scream of pain didn't erupt until they landed, and he fell to one knee, gasping. "Sweet Merlin on a bicycle!" he panted. "That hurt!"

"I do apologise, Harry," Dumbledore began to say, but Harry waved him off.

"Not your fault," he managed to grunt. "Let's get in there."

"I fear that I must leave you with the Aurors, Harry, since I am on the Wizengamot. Do not worry, I believe you have met at least one of them before." Tonks walked closer.

"Wotcher, Harry," she said. "What happened?"

"Couple of your co-workers felt that they needed to punctuate a verbal disagreement with a few physical expressions. I admit that I called the one whose wand I broke a Death Eater."

"So you've met Wilson, huh?" she said in a tone that made her thoughts on that specific man more than clear.

"He's that bad, huh? Why's he still working here?"

"Until now, no one could catch him at anything. May sound silly, sexy, but you may have done us all a favour by getting beaten up."

"Glad to help," he said with a grimace.

Shacklebolt stepped forward. "They're ready for you," he said. Much quieter, he added, "I'm sorry, by the way. He gives us all a bad name." Harry simply nodded his response. Walking was making his ribs hurt.

He was led into a large courtroom, where a large number of spectators were on hand. He was taken to the centre of the room, where he was placed in an unforgiving looking chair. The moment he was seated, chains wrapped around his arms, legs, and unfortunately, his chest. He winced as he inhaled sharply through his teeth.

"Auror Tonks," Albus Dumbledore said, "please remove the bindings holding Mr. Black's chest. Given the condition I found him in at Azkaban, he is a minimal flight risk. The trial that will result from his condition, by the by, will take place before the week is out." The hardness in his voice reminded many why he was considered someone on whose bad side you did not wish to be, despite the well-cultivated image of being a pleasantly potty old man. Nymphadora did as ordered, and Harry began to breathe easier immediately. "Mr. Weasley, if you would read the charges?"

Percy Weasley stood, frowning as he looked at the sheet of parchment, and then cleared his face. "On this date, February 25, 1995, it is hereby stated that you are on trial for the wilful murder of five foreign nationals, namely Naga brought in for the second challenge of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. What is your plea?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but a surprising voice answered for him. "The defendant pleads not guilty," James Potter said. He walked over to Harry. "I know more than enough law to be useful here," he said quietly. "We may not get along, but the second I heard that there were Naga in there, I knew that nothing good could come of it. I trust Lily, too." Harry simply nodded, too shocked to speak.

The man who thinks I'm a Death Eater in training is defending me? Harry thought. *What is the world coming to? I'd think that he would*

want me in Azkaban early, to pre-emptively ensure I don't do something!

"Would the Defence call their first witness?" Dumbledore said.

"The Defence calls Harry Black." There were some murmurs, but no one seemed overly surprised. "Mr. Black, tell us what happened, in your own words."

"The challenge started, and since I knew what was likely in there, due to the help of a fellow student named Parvati Patil, I looked for heat signatures coming from the mountain."

"So you knew that there were Naga going into the challenge?"

"Yes. That's what Parvati suggested, at least. I didn't think to ask about what kind of creatures were likely until the day before ... uh, two days ago, I think that was. I spoke to Professor Rubeus Hagrid, who suggested that I speak to Parvati. I was given the impression that teachers were still forbidden to offer blatant help, so he pointed me in the direction of a fellow student who might be able to help. She listened to the rhyme with me and went white. She warned me that I was facing Naga, who were beautiful and fearsome warriors that were half snake and half human."

"Did you know about the Veela/Naga blood feud?"

"Not until later. I only thought to ask Parvati the day before the challenge, and didn't really have a chance to do an in-depth study of the Naga."

"Continue with your account," Dumbledore said from the podium.

"Well, as I said, I searched for heat signatures, and found some pouring from the mountain. I followed them inside and eventually heard them talking to each other about how the one Veela was almost dead, and the other would soon follow."

"You expect us to believe that they were talking about this where anyone could hear?" Fudge scoffed.

“Yes. They were speaking to each other in a language that I doubt that they expected anyone in England to know. Parseltongue, the language of snakes.”

This caused an explosion of murmurs in the room, and Fudge looked as if Christmas had come again. “So you admit to being a dark wizard?” he crowed.

“I’m as dark as Grindlewald was light,” Harry replied with a scowl.

“You speak parseltongue,” Fudge said. “This proves that you’re dark, and intended to murder those Naga.”

“They spoke parseltongue as well, Minister,” Harry said. “Doesn’t that mean that I actually rid the world of five dark creatures?” He tried not to look smug at the Minister’s gob smacked expression.

“Besides, Minister,” James Potter interjected, “there is no proof that parseltongue is automatically an evil ability. Merlin is said to have spoken to snakes, and I was there when this young man saved the life of the young Malfoy heir with his usage of the ability. Are these the actions of a dark wizard? A Gryffindor, no less?” When Fudge didn’t answer, he motioned Harry to continue.

“Well, after I heard the Naga talking, I admit that I went all Gryffindor and attacked.” This drew laughter from the assembled crowd. “One of the Naga asked in English why I was attacking them for doing what they had been hired for. When I responded to them in parseltongue, the kid gloves came off, and I was fighting for my life. Viktor Krum and Cedric Diggory entered the cave as I was fighting them. Krum grabbed his hostage and left, while Cedric moved at first to help me, but then took a look at Miss Gabrielle Delacour, and moved to stabilise her.” He stopped. “Did she survive?”

“That’s irrelevant!” Fudge bellowed.

“Not to me!” Harry bellowed right back at him. “If I’m going to go to Azkaban for this, I want to know if it was worth it.” He sank into the chair, gasping. Forcing himself like that was not doing his ribs any good.

"She survived, Mr. Potter," Albus Dumbledore said from the podium.

"Thank you. Well, to finish, we continued to fight with me killing two of them through judicious usage of the Banishing and Summoning Charms. Miss Fleur Delacour came in at that point, took one look at her sister, and ... well, I guess you could say that she 'Veela'd out'. She took on the more avian characteristics, and began to throw fireballs at the Naga, which split their attention. My mistake was to create something to slow the Naga down. I created a load of extremely cold liquid above their heads. Liquid oxygen. Fleur's next fireball ignited it. I still don't know how the six of us escaped, although I've been told it was my magical signature on all of us."

"What made you think of liquid oxygen, of all things?" James asked.

"Laziness, more than anything else," Harry replied with a grimace. "I had created it to cool down the egg. I knew how to make it, since I'd done it before. Nitrogen would have been safer, but less certain in its creation, since I've never done that before. I wanted something very cold, since I knew that they were extremely comfortable in the hot conditions. I was also pretty sure that it would hurt them, but since they'd tried to flay the life from someone that they were supposed to be protecting, I wasn't entirely worried about *their* health."

"So, let me repeat this," James Potter said. "I just to need make sure I got the gist of it. You started the challenge, knowing there were Naga in there but *not* knowing about the feud. You were going to try to get around them, but then you heard them talking about attempting to kill one of the hostages. You rose and fought them to protect her life. In the battle, to slow them down, you hit them with liquid oxygen, which a fireball managed to ignite. The six of you – three champions and three hostages - somehow ended up outside. Is that essentially correct?" Harry nodded. "I have no further questions. Prosecution?" Fudge looked annoyed, but shook his head. "Defence now calls the Indian ambassador to the stand, and thanks him for agreeing to come here."

Gasps were heard, and Harry looked painfully to see a distinguished looking man approaching the questioning area. He sat after nodded to James and to the podium. "Thank you, sir," James said. "May I ask

you some simple questions about how the Naga were procured for this challenge?”

“You may,” came the response in cultured British English.

“Do you know the process for how the Naga were brought here?”

“Yes. We were approached by your Ministry to gather what could be a daunting creature for your students. We reminded your Ministry that they are sentient and able to make their own decisions, but since your law classifies them slightly differently, we needed to do things your way. The Naga were agreeable to a vacation and signed on immediately.”

“Were you aware of the list of champions?”

“How could we be? These negotiations were completed in August.”

“So the negotiations for them happened more than two months before the tournament started. Did no one contact you about it once it was discovered that there was a Veela in the tournament?”

“No. Had we been notified, we would have immediately recalled the Naga and helped to arrange a challenge less likely to cause death. After all, from the moment that the champions were chosen, there was a period of four months before the second challenge began. There would have been time to design a new challenge.” There was a pause. “I know that this will be stricken from your record, but I want your deciding body to hear this. The Indian government has no intention to pursue any actions against Mr. Black. He did a very brave thing against five opponents who are roundly considered to some of the best fighters in the world. We of the Indian wizarding government hold no ill will against him.”

Fudge was looking a rather pasty white at this statement. His look got worse when James Potter grinned and said, “So would you say, Mr. Ambassador, that to refer to this incident causing an international incident with the Indian government would be premature?”

“It depends on your meaning. Mr. Potter's actions are not the cause of any international incident, but the reaction of the British Ministry

might well cause one.” The ambassador looked sharply at Cornelius Fudge. “I am officially stating that our government does not appreciate being the excuse to pursue someone, let alone a child on the cusp of adulthood. We were unaware of the problem until an external party informed us of the situation.”

“Defence is finished with this witness,” James smirked. Fudge was looking green, and simply waved off the chance to question the Indian ambassador. The smirk turned into a full grin. “Defence now requests the presence of the French Minister for Magic in the chamber.” Silence reigned as a dignified man walked into the room and approached the bench. Harry found that he looked familiar, but wasn't sure why. “Mr. Delacour, thank you for coming,” James said.

“I am pleased to speak for the defence in this case. From what I have been able to find out, I would not have both daughters alive today without Mr. Black's assistance. In fact, I will cause a problem with this prosecution by stating that if Mr. Black is convicted, we will ensure his emigration to France, and repel all attempts to capture him to place him in Azkaban. I state this with the support of our parliament.”

This put the crowd into a bit of a state, and Albus Dumbledore looked down at the man. Only those who knew him could recognise the amused twinkle in his eyes. His face was stern. “I am afraid that I must request that you not say such things again, sir,” he told the man.

“My apologies, Chief Warlock. It was a point that needed to be made, however.”

“Understood.” He was prevented from saying more by Fudge, who approached and whispered to Dumbledore for several seconds. Finally, they separated, and Dumbledore nodded. “It is the desire of the prosecution to drop all charges against Mr. Harry Black at this time. He is hereby ordered immediately released, and it is strongly suggested that he visit St. Mungo's at his soonest possibility.” Tonks immediately released his chains and helped him to his feet.

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As he lay in his bed in St. Mungo's the next day, he was surprised when the door opened to admit the Delacour family – the Minister and

his wife, and of course his two daughters. Madame Delacour looked about five months into increasing that number by at least one. In his weakened condition, having three Veela in the room caused some overload of his ability to ignore the Veela power, and his eyes glazed. Fleur's mother smiled softly and concentrated, and Harry felt his senses return. "My apologies, Mr. Black," she said. "I sometimes lose control of ze Veela abilities, being pregnant."

"No apologies necessary, Madame Delacour. Please forgive me for not bowing before three such beautiful ladies," he said with a smile.

"We understand, 'Arry," Fleur giggled. "Zank you for my sister's life."

He looked confused. "Why are you thanking me? I would have done it anyway. I didn't do it for a pat on the back."

"Zat is why I care for you, 'Arry. We are supposed to be enemies, but you say zings such as zat. And zen you expect me not to melt."

Mr. Delacour stepped forward. "You have my thanks as their father, and you have the thanks of the entire French wizarding public as well." His accent was there, but not as strong as the ones sported by his wife and daughters. "If there is ever anything I can do for you, you need but ask."

"No sir. I refuse to take payment of any sort for doing what I would have anyway. And asking you for a favour because of this would be asking for payment." Fleur sighed in a dreamy voice in response. Harry shook his head in amusement, and then looked at the youngest girl there. She was only eight or nine, but Harry could tell that she was going to be a heart-breaker when she entered school at eleven, even under the few bandages that she still needed to wear. "You must be Gabrielle," he said to her as he forced himself upright. "I'm pleased to finally meet you."

"Zank you for saving me, Monsieur Black. It means more to me zan you can know."

"And thank you for surviving, Miss Delacour. It makes this all worthwhile." He smiled at her.

"Now 'Arry, you need to wait until she is sixteen before adding 'er to ze 'arem," Fleur laughed.

"I could be ze towel girl," Gabrielle giggled, putting on a hopeful look.

Harry simply put his head in his hands and began to laugh. "I'm not going to live down the multiple girlfriends thing, am I?"

"Probably not, Mr. Black," was the amused response from Fleur and Gabrielle's father. "Especially since they appear to know about each other, from what Fleur tells us, and don't mind."

"My fault for being a lucky teenager, sir," Harry said with a wry smile. "By the way, I just want to say that I appreciate your stopping by to see me and let me see that the trip to Azkaban was worth it."

"No it wasn't!" Gabrielle suddenly said loudly. "I 'ave 'eard about zose Dementors, and you should not 'ave been placed wiz zem!"

"You're here, and you're alive, and it certainly looks as if you're going to make a complete recovery," he replied. "That was what I was hoping for when I went up against those Naga. I didn't know you, but I wanted you to live. You did, so going to prison overnight *is* worth it." Gabrielle sniffled and suddenly threw her arms around Harry before beginning to cry in earnest.

"You may well end up with my daughter petitioning to join your group of girlfriends, the way she is reacting right now," her father said with a smile. "You are a man of honour, and the Delacours all recognise that. As for our being here, we not only wished to thank you, but we will be meeting with a school representative in the lobby and returning to the school with you." The smile widened. "You have my full permission to call me Jean, by the way."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, feeling a little light-headed at the honour. "Um, I mean, Jean."

"I am Aimee," his wife said. "I do not want to hear 'Mrs. Delacour' cross those lips."

"Um, yes ma'am," he said with a gulp, and then grinned. "Sorry. Aimee."

A Healer bustled into the room and gave him a quick once-over. "Well, the ribs are healed, and so is the blow to the head. Just take it a little easy for the next few days, all right?" Harry nodded. "Well, best be on your way, Mr. Black. The Headmaster is waiting for you in the lobby."

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Harry's return to Hogwarts was unusual, since the French Minister was along for the ride. That turned it into a diplomatic visit, which had several people apoplectic – mostly the Slytherins, who were trying to figure out a way to get closer and introduce themselves. Harry, on the other hand, introduced the Delacours to those that he knew and cared for. He found himself amused to note the furious blushing from his brother James when he met Gabrielle. She seemed to feel somewhat similarly, blushing cutely in return.

"I may be lucky and not have her petitioning me in eight years," he whispered to Fleur.

She hugged his arm. "Do you know what your breazing in my ear does to me?" she whispered back.

"Probably the same thing that your breathing does to me," he answered back. She smiled at him and blushed.

Finally, the group had a chance to be by themselves, as alone as a group consisting of a family of four (and a half) and most of Harry's friends and family can be. Fleur stood. "Arry? I wish it stated, before witnesses, zat I vow to do anyzing you ask of me, in zanks for saving my sister's life. Zis is not payment, it is what I truly desire to do. Wezzer or not you accept, it is what I shall do. And I mean *anyzing*."

"Not to be crude, but you're telling me that if I asked to see you do a strip tease before the entire student body ..."

"I would do it, if you asked. I would prefer a more private showing, I admit," she said, eyes twinkling while Harry went white.

His colour started to return when Jean and Aimee laughed. "Harry, we have known since the Yule Ball," Jean said. "She told us who the special man was that had gotten her virginity." He looked to his mother and stepfather.

"Are you ashamed?" Lily asked.

"No. Worried that -"

"No, I haven't lost respect for you." He relaxed visibly. "I thought that might have been your worry," she said, smiling at him. "Making love to a beautiful woman is not a reason to be worried, Harry. You're still my baby boy, and I will always love you."

"Mum!" he complained, turning a bright red. "Shouldn't that be James anyway? He's the youngest!"

"But you're my first. I love you all, and you each have a special place in my heart. You as my first, Sienna as my baby girl, and James as the baby of the family." All three were blushing at this point, and she buffed her nails on her robe. "Still got it, Sirius. I can embarrass them all with a single sentence." She laughed and swept them all into a hug. "I do love you three," she said fondly.

"Zat is 'ow I feel, Mrs. Black," Aimee said, resting a hand on her burgeoning belly. "Fleur and Gabrielle are my treasures, and so shall be little Jessica, if it is a girl." She paused. "Zat sounds wrong. I will treasure a little boy as well. My family tends towards girls, 'owever."

Chapter 12

The Delacours remained in Britain for the next three months, with Jean commuting to Paris for his job. Things were less than pleasant between the French and British Ministries, due to the lack of communication concerning the tasks. Fudge had barely escaped the loss of his position by making Ludo Bagman the fall wizard for the 'mishap'. Fudge was still being looked at with a wary eye by both the Indian and the French Ministries.

Harry and Ginny were once again being romantic toward each other, which was beginning to worry Harry. "Merlin knows I'm happy about it, being a teenager and all," he said to Sirius one day, "but I'm wondering if something else is going on. I've got three that are all aware that the others are dating me, and I have suspicions that they're at least exploring with each other. I've been informed by the Gryffindor Quidditch girls that they would like to get me alone in the showers some day. Parvati has honoured Hermione's and Ginny's claim on me, but I think she's thinking of asking permission to join the crowd that surrounds me." He frowned. "Then there's the whole Ginny/Neville thing, and what's been happening with Hermione and Ron." His frown deepened. "I'm just not sure what to do."

Sirius frowned. "Hmm, I'm in the odd position of being jealous as hell that my school career wasn't like that, but also needing to advise you. Are you leading any of them on?"

"No. They are all aware that the others are romantically involved with me. As I said, I think that Ginny and Hermione are romantically involved, and from things that Katie and Angelina have said, I think that the Quidditch Hotties have been a trio ever since they noticed each other 'that way'. Fleur has flat out propositioned Hermione, and I think I've seen her looking at Ginny with some interest."

"How about Parvati?"

"Other than the fact that she likes to walk around in her room in a sweater and knickers?"

Sirius looked at him for a long moment. "How did you learn that?"

"They trusted me with the secret of how to go up to the girls dorms, and I have not broken that trust. No other students have been told the secret to getting upstairs into the girls dorms, and I won't let anything happen." At Sirius's raised eyebrow, Harry filled in what he meant. "I have had sex a grand total of three times, and that was all within a twenty-four hour period, right after the Yule Ball. Nothing else has happened with *anyone*. Strikes me as a violation of the trust they showed in telling me the passwords if I try to start something upstairs in the girls' dorms."

Sirius smiled. "You are a better man than I am, Harry. I've never known the passwords for the Gryffindor girls' side, and if I had, I would have used it for hanky panky. I think you're in the process of explaining to yourself how such a thing is happening. You are an honourable young man, and some women find that sexy. How you're lucky enough to find women willing to share you is likely a question for the ages. Don't over-think it, though. That way lies ruining the whole thing." He laughed wryly. "I have that problem myself. I worry about James coming to his senses. Do I step away and let them get remarried, since I know that she still loves him, or do I get into a fight, trying to keep her?"

"Do you love her?" Harry asked in a voice that he knew told Sirius that he knew he answer already.

"Since we were students," he said softly. "James got there first, though, and she loves him still."

Harry snorted. "I'm the wrong one to ask, honestly. To me, you're Dad, and he's simply the man I used to call Father. But I don't expect him to come to his senses, to be honest. He's spent fourteen years telling everyone that I'm the child of a Death Eater. There is no love between us, even if he was nice enough to defend me at my trial. Sienna and Junior are the ones to ask. But then again, as you and Mum are always saying, why borrow trouble? This isn't something we're going to need to worry about for a long time, if ever."

Sirius shook his head. "I know. I just can't believe my luck in getting your mother to marry me."

"Or mine in getting you as a father," Harry said. They shared a good-natured hug.

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Harry was studying quite late on the night of the twenty-fourth of May, when he was approached by Professor McGonagall. "Mr. Potter, we have need of you. It is time for the third challenge to begin. If you would join the other three in the Great Hall, we can begin." She exited. He stood to follow her, but was stopped by the Gryffindor girls.

"We want to wish you luck, Harry," Angelina said. She pulled him into an embrace and kissed him in a manner that left him no illusions as to whether or not she intended to follow through on her thoughts about the changing room showers. Katie and Alicia also told him the same thing in the same way. Lavender's kiss was nice, but certainly not one that made him smoulder, but that was more than made up for by Parvati, who whispered to him that she'd gladly be in the pile of bodies, if only he would ask.

He was kissed by all of the third year girls, who gave him nice kisses, until he reached Ginny, who bit her lower lip just before pouncing and giving him a kiss that practically demanded a more detailed response than he currently had time for. The last one in that line surprised him – his own sister, Sienna. She pulled him close and kissed his lips, and he knew that he was going to have words with her when all this was over, because that was simply not the kiss that a sister gave to a brother.

He finally faced Hermione and took her hands. "Come back to us safely." She pulled him into a gentle hug and then kissed him sweetly. He returned it, but frowned to himself.

"We all have to have a very long talk when this is said and done," he told the assembled ladies. "A very long talk."

"Clothing optional?" Katie asked impudently. He just laughed and shook his head in the negative.

"I'll be back to harass you after I win the Tournament!" he said with a jaunty wave as he exited the Tower.

Down in the Great Hall, he found the other champions sitting around a small table, sipping cups of something steamy. They motioned him over and poured him a cup. It appeared to be coffee.

He took a sip and coughed. "Good God!" he exclaimed. "This stuff is paint remover!"

"Turkish coffee," Fleur said with a sigh. "Very powerful, and zey brewed it strong. Not as strong as I usually drink it, but it will do. We will likely need ze kick zat it will give us, since it is so late zat zis challenge begins." Harry thought for a moment about what she said, and then stood and saluted her.

"If this is weaker than what you usually drink, then I am in awe of you!" He drank deeply, feeling his nerves starting to jangle slightly from the infusion of whatever it was in this coffee that made it so powerful.

The doors opened again and the five judges stepped into the room. "Good evening," Albus Dumbledore said. "We have called you here because we will be sending you to the third task after midnight. You will have approximately four hours to finish the task. Trust us when we say that you will need the hours that you will have. You may return to your rooms in a few moments to retrieve anything that you can easily carry that might help you in this endeavour."

"How can we, if we do not know the conditions we will be entering?" Viktor Krum asked in his thick accent.

"That is the first part of the challenge," Crouch said simply. "Decide what you think you will need and return here by thirty minutes after the midnight hour has struck." The doors opened again. The champions looked at each other for a moment and then left the hall in a rush.

Harry flew back to the Gryffindor Tower and burst through the opening, much to the surprise of the still awake Gryffindors, who started to throw questions his way. "No time," he said. "The challenge has started." He flew up the stairs and emptied his backpack onto the bed. He quickly strapped the Gryffindor sword in its scabbard onto his back, having discovered a very comfortable way of wearing it that

made drawing the sword quite easy. He looked around the room for a moment before his eyes fell on his invisibility cloak and his broom. He put the broom in its carrying case and shrank it, then stuffed case and cloak into his pack. He grabbed a handful of various chocolate things to eat, throwing them in as well. He did one more look around, shrugged and then left. "See you when I get back!" he said to the stunned Gryffindors.

He came to a stop in the Great Hall to discover that he was the first one back. "Not taking much with you, Harry?" the Headmaster asked with a smile.

"I don't know what I'll need, so I figured that I would rather not weigh myself down too much. If I need more, oh well. I'll try to figure something out." He sat down and waited for the others to arrive, being careful not to drink any more of that coffee that Fleur enjoyed so much. If he did, he knew he'd be flying wherever he was going without needing his broom.

The others came in, Cedric, followed shortly by Fleur. Both of them also had backpacks, but neither seemed to have filled theirs with much, either. Fleur sat down beside Harry and kissed his cheek. "No matter 'oo wins zis competition," she said, "I am a winner, 'aving met you."

He blushed in response. "And I've already won. I have you as a friend, and perhaps more. Thank you."

Cedric came over, and Harry had a sudden idea. He stood and walked to the Headmaster and waited for him to notice him, since he was in conversation with Mr. Crouch at the moment. "Yes, Harry?" the Headmaster asked after a moment.

"Sir, is there anything in the rules against cooperation on these tasks?"

"How do you mean?" Dumbledore asked with some amusement.

"Teamwork. We work on the clues together and solve the puzzles together, and take the Cup together. Whoever wants the honour of being the winner can have it, since I still only want to get out of this

alive." He shrugged. "I know that we're supposed to be fighting for it ourselves, but how does that help learn magical cooperation?"

The Headmaster turned to Bartemius Crouch, who was smiling one of his very rare smiles. "I have overheard the entire conversation," he said. "There is nothing in the rules that would prevent such an occurrence. If you can convince the others, then by all means feel free to fight the challenge as a team."

Grinning, Harry returned to the table where Cedric and Fleur were talking animatedly. With a mock glare, Harry asked him, "Are you putting the moves on my girlfriend, Diggory?"

Cedric looked up at Harry in surprise, but caught the twinkle in the Gryffindor's eyes. "As a matter of fact, Black, I am. What are you going to do about it?"

"Compliment you on your intelligence, mainly," Harry replied as he sat back down. "It's up to her if she wants to let you get anywhere with the flirting." The three of them laughed, and waited for Krum to arrive. Harry grinned. "On a serious note, however, I had a thought about this competition. As I recall, there is a physical prize – the Cup – and a monetary one, going to the highest scoring person. I don't want the glory or the money, but I am willing to fight to win. How about the three of us work together to find the final solution to this challenge? I'll offer to Krum as well, but the way he's treated me this year, as if I were something to scrape off his shoe – well, I can't say that I'll be heartbroken when he says no."

"Is zat even allowed by ze rules?"

"That's why I was talking to the Headmaster. Mr. Crouch himself said that it was allowed within the rules. And as I said to them, isn't this whole competition supposed to teach us cooperation? How does fighting against each other do that?" The looks he received from the two of them were priceless.

Krum chose that moment to walk in, and his pack was noticeably heavier than any one of theirs, and possibly all three put together. He walked over to the young man and repeated his offer of cooperation. His answer was derisive laughter, and being ignored as Krum

continued on to Karkaroff. Harry merely shrugged dismissively and rejoined the other two.

"I think that it's a great idea, Harry," Cedric said. "You've helped me when you didn't have to, and even put up with all the crap that we were sending your way."

"You know 'ow I feel about it, 'Arry," Fleur added. "I will do much better wiz two strong men at my side." She gave the two of them a half-lidded look. "And per'aps we can ... celebrate ... after we win."

Harry bit his lower lip. "You are going to kill me with your sex drive, woman," he finally said with a laugh. "I'm sure of it."

"You will die 'appy, at least," was the impudent reply.

"Champions, if you would?" Bartemius Crouch said to the assembled four, who rose to meet him. "Soon we will portkey you to the beginning of your third and final challenge. You must work out where the Tri-Wizard Cup is stored, and retrieve it. It has been turned into a portkey which will return the winner to the Great Hall where we currently stand." He handed the four of them necklaces with a pendant containing a stylized emblem, the letters T.W.T. standing out from the busy background. "Please wear these so that the emblem touches your skin. When the Cup is activated by the winner, it will activate these and bring you here as well. The winner will be quite obvious, of course." He frowned. "They will also activate at the end of the allowed time period, if no one has found the Cup. If that is the case, you will be permitted to try again tomorrow night. You have until 5:30 this morning."

He waited until the four had followed his order and stood up. "Now, if the four of you will touch this," he finished, holding out a newspaper, "we will activate it and drop you at the beginning of the challenge."

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The four appeared at their destination, and both Cedric and Harry began to laugh quietly. "Well, we're in London," Cedric said. "This is the platform for the Hogwarts Express." They all walked to a wall which had four envelopes attached, with their names on them. Viktor

grabbed his, tore it open and laughed. He Disillusioned himself and was gone – they could hear him Apparate away.

They each opened theirs, and found a simple note inside. Comparing them showed the same clue: "Go where the goblins work to find the place where Jack the Red preyed."

"My first thought is Gringott's," Cedric said, "but that seems too obvious."

"Zen where?" Fleur asked. "And 'oo is zis 'Jack ze Red'?"

"I'm not sure," Harry said. "I want to figure out what they mean by this goblin clue first. I agree that Gringott's is too obvious an answer, but we are talking wizards here – not all of them think logically, especially when they get older." He laughed. "For Merlin's sake, the test they left in first year was solvable by three first years! But I'm betting that the people who came up with it knew it would be challenging for the average *adult* wizard." He paused. "Let's head out onto the Muggle part of the platform. Maybe we can think better out there, or find another clue or something."

They exited the Express platform and began to walk the platforms outside, each of them trying to come up with a solution other than Gringott's. They were fairly certain that the goblin run bank had been Krum's target. It was as they passed a billboard with maps of the station they were currently in that Harry suddenly stopped, looked at one of the maps and burst out laughing as he traced his fingers along the lines.

"Hey Cedric? Ever hear of some bloke called 'Jack the Ripper'?" At Cedric's confused nod, he continued. "Well, then, why don't we go downstairs into the Underground station and make our way to the Whitechapel stop?"

Cedric looked stunned for a moment, and then started to laugh. Fleur looked lost in thought. "Of course!" she finally said. "Ze goblins work underground, and zis map clearly calls ze London subway system ze Underground. Zis Jack ze Ripper did his work in ze Whitechapel station?"

"Not quite," Cedric said. "Jack was a crazy wizard who managed to confused the Muggles into thinking that he was one of them as he committed his murders. He killed in the Whitechapel area. The station is apparently in that area." She nodded, and the three of them headed down into the London subway system, but not before Harry Conjured a quick copy of the map on the board.

It took them several minutes to realise that there were no trains running at this hour of the night. "That's probably why they set it this way," Harry grumbled. "No trains, so there's less chance of being smacked by one. I've got my broom. How about you two?" Fleur responded in the negative, while Cedric grinned and enlarged his. Harry pulled his out and returned it to normal size and mounted it. "So, who would you prefer to ride with?"

Her eyes sparkled with mirth as she said, "I know 'ow you handle your ... broom, so I will ride you, 'Arry." She paused for a beat before saying, "I am sorry – I mean zat I will ride *wiz* you, 'Arry." Her look was anything but apologetic, and he couldn't help but laugh. She climbed on and nestled back against him.

"You are going to be a very distracting young lady, you know that?" he whispered in her ear. He started to fly, happy to have his arms around her waist. When he saw that the next station he reached was Easton, he stopped and had her pull the map out and asked her to hold it so that he could continue to follow it. A few moments of examining the map had him spinning down a different tunnel, where he once again saw 'King's Cross St. Pancras', followed shortly thereafter by 'Angel'. He scowled to see that, but kept flying. He reached Moorgate and came to a stop, before shooting out of the tunnel and into the station, Cedric in hot pursuit. When he found the arrows pointing to Hammersmith, he headed for that line, found the tunnel, and headed in the opposite direction.

He cheered as he passed Liverpool Street and Aldgate East, even doing a little side to side dance on his broom. "Keep zat up, 'Arry, and we will delay our travels," Fleur yelled into the rushing air. He laughed heartily and pulled to a stop in Whitechapel station, lowering the broom so that Fleur could climb off daintily.

The platform had been magically expanded, and there was a gigantic pit in the middle of it. On the other side of the pit, situated such that they would be unable to leap it no matter how strong their legs, sat a pedestal containing four parchment envelopes.

"Let's go with the old stand-by," Cedric said. "*Accio* envelope!" The envelope responded by doing absolutely nothing. He shrugged. "Hey, it was worth a try!"

"Had to try it," Harry replied with a laugh. "So what do we do?"

"Ow about flying over it?" Fleur asked. Harry shrugged and lifted off again, gliding slowly toward the pedestal. His broom stopped about halfway across the pit as if he had run into a wall of marshmallow, so he reached a hand out, very slowly. He was able to get it past the area where his broom stopped, so he knew that there was no obvious wall. He discovered that he could turn his broom sideways and reach the point where he could get no closer to the pedestal, which gave him a greater reach past that area. He undid the sword and tried extending his reach further, with no problems. He flew back and landed next to the others after sheathing the sword.

"It looks like things can go past that wall – except us. So what do we do?"

"Well, we could try pulling the envelopes off the pedestal and see if they can be Summoned, or we can see if we can cross by running a rope across." He reached into his pack and pulled out a length of rope. "I will admit that my thought is that we're supposed to cross this pit in some way. We obviously can't jump it or fly it. Maybe a slow transit across will allow it."

Harry looked at the rope and then pulled his sword. He tied the rope around the base of the blade where it was *not* sharpened, and then pointed the tip of the sword at the wall near the pedestal. He concentrated and built his power before shouting, "*Accio* wall!"

The blade shot from Harry's hand and flew at the wall across the pit, where it managed to embed itself into the stone and tile surprisingly deeply. "Why did zat work, when ze *Accio* did not work on ze envelopes?" Fleur asked, more than a little puzzled.

"I'm betting that there are specific charms on the envelopes and if you remember, the golden egg from the first task," Cedric said with a smile. "Good thinking, Harry."

"Actually, it's me being stupid," was the blushing reply. "I just went blank for a moment, and thought of that. You're the one who thought that running a rope across would be good. It was my forgetting your *Accio* didn't work that got us that line across the pit."

"We should tie this off and then figure out who's going across," Cedric said as he walked over to a post, quickly tying the rope around the beam with a complicated knot. At Harry's interested look, he simply said, "Sailing. We have a small lake on our property. You need some good knots on boats." With the knot tied off tightly, so proven by Cedric actually climbing onto the rope and hanging from it, they walked to the edge of the pit. Cedric dropped a small stone off the edge of the pit. "Thirty feet, I figure," was his comment when he heard the stone strike bottom. "Enough to hurt, but not kill anyone. If you land wrong, you might break something, but more likely you'll be stunned."

"So, which one of us slithers across the rope first?" Harry asked. "Is it me, so that you two have someone to land on if you fall, or is it Cedric, who is smart enough not to let go, or is it our bird-like one, who will simply float gently to the bottom if she accidentally lets go? I vote for Cedric, since he *is* the one who thought about the rope and how to use it." Fleur nodded. "Looks like you get to try first, Cedric."

"We should go one at a time," Cedric said. "We don't want to put too much stress on the sword." With that, he grabbed the rope and let his feet dangle into the pit, and was across in no time, traversing hand over hand. Once there, he reached for the envelopes and discovered that he could only claim his own. He started in surprise, and then walked back toward them.

He was walking across the open air of the pit, a huge grin on his face!

"You'll understand when you get over there," was his only response to the gawking that Fleur and Harry were giving him.

Fleur climbed on next, hanging upside down by hands and legs. Harry's eyebrows rose as he realised that she was wearing a skirt, so he gently blocked Cedric's view and did a mild sticking charm to keep her from flashing the two of them. "Why did you wear a skirt?" he asked softly to himself, as if he were talking to her.

"Because I wasn't zinking," she answered, blushing. "I just put on ze easiest zings to slip into." She then turned her attention back to the rope and shimmied across, retrieving her own envelope quickly. She then burst into laughter as she looked back toward Harry and Cedric. "Come along, 'Arry!"

He quickly shimmied across in the same manner that Fleur had fairly rapidly, and pulled his sword from the wall with no little amount of effort. As he watched Cedric pull the rope back across as he wound it back into a coil, Harry was stunned to see that there was no pit! He grabbed his envelope and crooked an arm to Fleur, and the two walked back to Cedric. "I love it – a one-way charm!" he said as he looked back, seeing the pit as he had when they had first landed at this station.

He held up his envelope. "Shall we see if all the clues are the same, or different?" Without waiting for an answer, he opened his. "Find the White City" was what the note inside his envelope read.

"What the hell is the White City?" Cedric grumbled. Harry responded by pulling out the map of the Underground and doing a temporary sticking charm to make it stay on the wall.

The three of them stood against the wall and examined the map minutely. "We have four hours," Harry said, so I can't help but think everything needs to be done in the Underground system. Now we just need to find their reference!" He ran his fingers back and forth from the top of the map. "Maybe there's a Tolkien reference? Some station named Gondor?"

"Ow about one called 'White City'?" Fleur asked, her finger stopped on a specific station. The two boys blinked and followed her finger, finding a station that was, in fact, named White City. "It is after a station called Shepherd's Bush," she said.

"And is apparently near a completely unrelated station called Shepherd's Bush on a different line," Cedric mused with a slight chuckle.

"I didn't name them," Harry replied with his own chuckle. "Not my fault." He mounted his broom after tracing the line, and patted in front of him for Fleur to climb on. She wiggled against him slightly, and before he took off, hugged her quickly.

They were in the air again quickly, night vision spells in place this time to help speed their passage. They reversed their track to the Liverpool station, dropping the night vision spells as they arrived. A quick jaunt into the station to switch lines left them on the proper line, with Fleur whimpering at the manoeuvres that Harry had pulled at a surprisingly high speed, Cedric right behind him. "I won't let you be hurt, Fleur," Harry murmured. "I'm sorry for scaring you." She simply nodded slightly, still fairly scared.

"I am sorry zat I don't handle brooms better," she said softly.

"I thought that you handled mine wonderfully after the Yule Ball," he murmured in her ear, the smile on his face evident in his voice.

"We do not 'ave ze time, 'Arry," she giggled, sounding much more relaxed. Harry grinned to himself, having achieved his aim.

They flew along the tunnel at a fairly high speed, Harry counting the stations as they blew past them. He laughed out loud as he realised how the Muggles would react if he shot by them during the daytime, since he knew he was moving at a greater speed than the trains would ever reach. He was able to reach a fairly high speed with the straight line he had from Chancery Lane to Notting Hill Gate, and only slowed significantly when he reached Shepherd's Bush. He came gently to a stop at the White City Station and found a simple pedestal there, with four envelopes.

In front of the pedestal sat a sphinx. It was a beautiful creature, no matter how you defined beautiful. Her leonine half was that of a majestic lioness, and her humanoid half was certainly nothing to sneeze at, Harry thought. She was classically beautiful, with the dark skin so common to Middle Eastern and Northern African women,

which was not surprising considering she was likely Egyptian. A short, soft golden fur covered an otherwise naked human half. Her arms ended in leonine paws. Golden wings extended gracefully from her back.

"I guard the clue to your next destination," she said simply. "Answer it correctly and you may have the clue. Answer incorrectly and you shall never achieve your goal without a fight."

"We do not wish to fight so noble a creature," Harry said, bowing.

"Then answer correctly," she replied, a slight smile quirking at the corners of her mouth. She cleared her throat softly and then spoke the riddle.

What does man love more than life,

Fear more than death or mortal strife?

What have the poor that the rich require,

And what do contented men desire?

What does the miser spend and the spendthrift save,

And all men carry to their grave?

The three champions looked at the sphinx for a long moment. "I hate riddles," Harry grumbled.

"Can't say as I'm terribly fond of the little buggers myself," Cedric answered him. "Let's see what we can come up with."

"All the obvious immediate answers make no sense," Harry said. "Love, money, freedom – those sort of answers. None of them fit."

Fleur scowled. "What can ze answer be?" She began to walk back and forth, obviously deep in thought.

"I'm in her camp," Cedric growled. "I know we need to answer this thing, but I *hate* riddles as much as you do."

Harry snorted. "There's one particular Riddle I think I hate more than anyone else." Cedric gave him a puzzled look. "Voldemort. Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Cedric snorted his response. "Only you, Black," he said with a small laugh.

"Argh!" Fleur screamed from across the platform. "Nozing! I come up with nozing!"

The sphinx perked up slightly. "Is that your answer?"

Harry looked at Fleur, who was quite puzzled, and at the sphinx, and thought over what Fleur had said. As his mind went over the riddle again, he began to laugh. He looked to Fleur and said, "Milady, I suggest that you tell this fair sphinx that it is in fact your answer."

Fleur looked more confused now than puzzled, but she nodded to Harry before turning to the sphinx. "Yes. Zat is my answer."

The sphinx reared back on her hind legs, looking quite threatening for a moment. Her forelegs and paws morphed into human forearms and hands, and then she reached over and grabbed three envelopes, giving one to each person by name.

Fleur was looking even more confused. "You got the answer, Fleur!" Harry said, picking her up and spinning her around. "What does man love more than life? Nothing! Fear more than death or mortal strife? Nothing! A miser spends nothing, and a spendthrift saves nothing. And we all carry nothing to the grave."

"You solved it, 'Arry!" she cried happily.

"Oh no, Fleur. The reason I realised what the answer was came from the sphinx's reaction to your outburst. You cried out that you came up with nothing. She perked up. So I thought about reasons why that might be the case, and decided to apply the word 'nothing' to the questions. I never would have come up with it on my own. You solved it, and I'm standing by that."

"He's right, you know," Cedric said. "I hadn't come up with anything either." He turned to the sphinx. "We thank you, oh beauteous one," he said, bowing low to her.

The sphinx bowed low to the three of them. "Thank you for your kind words to me, and your desire to avoid a fight. You three speak well for your kind." She settled back in front of the pedestal.

They opened their envelopes to find a simple clue. "Find the Circus with no acts," Cedric read. "No offence, milady," he said, looking to the sphinx, "but I hate riddles like this."

"None taken," laughed the sphinx. "For those who hate them, you solve them well. Fare you well on your quest."

They spread out the map again, enlarging it slightly to read it easier. "We know that it has to be in the Tube system," Harry said, "because the others have been so far."

"So we need to look for a stop on zis system zat qualifies as a circus?" Fleur asked.

"Makes sense to me," Cedric answered. "So, let's get looking." The three of them began to scan the enlarged map.

A short time later, Harry groaned. "Wonderful. Two jump to mind immediately. We have an Oxford Circus station, and Piccadilly Circus. The good thing is that we can check Oxford and then slide down one stop from there to Piccadilly if we need to."

"So, what do we do, then?" Cedric asked.

"Fly back the way we came. We passed Oxford on the way here." They mounted their brooms and were soon on their way to Oxford Circus, which turned into a short lay-over, since there was no sign of anything even remotely challenge related at the station. After a short jaunt in the wrong direction, they were quickly at Piccadilly Circus, where once again they found nothing but a pedestal with four envelopes. They once again checked the area for traps, and once again came up empty.

"Visit ze Queen?" Fleur asked. "What are we supposed to do now? Is zere a Bucking'am Palace station?"

"Nothing by that name," Cedric said. "I don't know the layout comparison between topside and down here."

"Why don't we fly to the Victoria station and see what's in the area?" Harry asked. "It's possible that it was named for Queen Victoria, and there might be something in the area that will let us know where Buckingham is." He shrugged. "It's either that or we surface here and risk discovery by Muggles. It's one of the reasons I think everything is down here, or at least mostly. The Underground is not used during certain hours of the night, so I think we've been using it while they aren't."

"It makes as much sense as anyzing else," Fleur said. "You zink Victoria station is a way to go, zen let us go zere, and see if we can find a clue." She climbed back onto his broom. "Shall we?"

He smiled and climbed on behind her, grinning as she nestled back against him. "I look forward to ze celebration after we win," she purred at him, and he wordlessly told her that he also looked forward to it.

In short order, the three of them were at the Green Park station and switching lines. Another false start, and they were soon at the Victoria station, and realised the moment that they arrived that the station itself was their destination.

The platform had been magically expanded and the pedestal stood to one side. There was a pit near it, but not blocking the pedestal, and there was horrible crying noises coming from within it. They leapt from their brooms and rushed over, but were stopped by a gout of flame shooting from the pit.

Casting a quick shield, Harry looked over the lip of the pit carefully. What he saw tore at his heart. "There's a baby Horntail in there!" he cried. "It's being sucked into quicksand and can't get out!" He turned to look at Cedric and Fleur and found them rummaging through their packs. Cedric pulled out the rope again, and Fleur grabbed her wand.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Fleur cried as she pointed into the pit. The dragon shimmered for a moment, but stayed in the pit.

"Try a lasso!" Harry said. "Let's see if we can get it around its neck, and lift it!" Cedric murmured a spell and then lowered the rope down. "I'm going to jump in and try to get the rope around it, and we can both lift up, Cedric!"

"It's quicksand! You'll drown!" Cedric said.

"I can swim, so I can survive it! That's how you survive quicksand." Harry jumped into the pit feet first.

He was literally stunned as his feet impacted the tile of an unblemished floor. The pit and Horntail were gone, and Cedric's rope was coiled loosely on the tile.

"What 'appened to ze baby dragon?" Fleur cried.

"I ... ow, that hurt ... I think that ... ow ... I think that there never was a dragon or a pit," Harry said, wincing as he rubbed his legs. Fleur came to him and hugged him tightly, and Cedric made him lie flat on the tile for a few moments while he rubbed his legs.

"Been there myself, mate," Cedric said. "Came off the bottom step once expecting there to be more steps. Almost broke my leg from tripping. Just give us a few minutes to get you back in working order, and then we'll grab the envelopes."

"I wonder why zere was an illusion 'ere," Fleur said. "We could 'ave easily taken ze envelopes and left everyzing alone."

"Maybe they'll tell us after we win," Harry laughed. "Maybe they were testing other things as well, other than how clever we are." He snorted. "And maybe I can sound like I know what I'm talking about. I'm fourteen, and trying to figure out what people five and ten times my age are thinking."

"Well, whatever the reasoning was, I would do it again," Cedric said, and then he snorted in amusement. "Besides, if there was anyone

who would have had a reason to ignore a Hungarian Horntail, it would have been you."

"How could I leave a baby to die?" Harry asked simply. "He never did anything to me."

He was suddenly being hugged by Fleur and trying not to laugh at Cedric's attempts not to look at her shapely rear end. He whispered that to her, and she looked back at Cedric. "It is all right to look, Cedric," she told him, to be answered with a deep blush from the Hufflepuff.

Finally, the three of them stood, walked to the pedestal and claimed their envelopes. "You will find your prize on the City Road. You must see the King first, and then an Angel before you shall find it."

"I may hurt whoever came up with these things," Harry murmured with no real malice. "I really hate riddles." He grumbled wordlessly as he pulled out his map again and spread it on the ground. After enlarging it, he stood and walked around a bit to make sure his legs were okay.

He came to a stop behind Fleur, some distance away, as she knelt on the ground before the map. He simply stood admiring the way that her skirt hugged her body, but finally shook his head. "Later, you idiot," he growled softly to himself. "Admire her arse later."

"You can admire it now if you wish," she said in a normal tone, and then giggled.

He knelt down beside her and looked at the map. "If I admire it much more, I'm going to want to do more than just look, and I don't think we have enough time in the challenge to do that." He looked at his watch, which displayed 3:08 AM. "Nope. We've only got two hours or so left in the night."

"I zink I love you, 'Arry Black," she murmured with a fond grin.

"There are three 'Kings' of sorts on this map," Cedric said with an amused smile. "At least, so far as I can see. We've got Kingsbury up here – huh, I'm glad we didn't see that Queensbury earlier – we've

also got Dalston Kingsland, and let's not forget the ever present King's Cross."

"Mudchute?" Fleur asked with amusement as her eyes fell elsewhere on the map. "Where do you English come up with your station names?"

"Beats me," Harry laughed. "Need to look for an Angel now." He whispered softly, "Other than the one next to me."

"Arry," she purred, "you are determined to make us late, are you not? When you say zings such as zat ..."

"How good *are* your ears?" he asked with more than a little surprise.

"Very. We Veela 'ave ze best of all bird species. Sharp eyes and sharp 'earing."

"I'll remember to watch my tongue around you, then," he said with a laugh.

"It is not zat long," she growled seductively.

"Okay," Harry said, blushing furiously. "Angels on the map. Angels, angels, angels ..."

Cedric started to laugh. "Let's each check around a station with King in the name," he finally was able to say. "I'll look around Dalston station, Fleur can check Kingsbury, and you can check King's Cross."

"No need," Fleur said. "Look on zis ...uh, Norzern, from ze key ... Norzern line. If we go from left to right, zere is ze King's Cross station and zen Angel. I see no City Road, 'owever."

"I don't know," Harry said. "I suppose we should fly to King's Cross and then to Angel and see what we can find from there." He shrugged. "Shall we?"

They were soon on the brooms, and Fleur looked back at Harry as she became quite aware that his reaction to her had not completely

subsided. "I do not mean to be a tease, 'Arry," she said softly. "You just bring out my ... 'ow you say ... naughty side."

"You'd be a tease if you had no intention on following through," he whispered to her. "I know otherwise. Just don't wiggle too much in front of me, or else I'll be really tempted to find out if you can make love on a broom, and this is completely the wrong time for that."

The trio shot north until Warren Street, switching to the Northern line at that point, where they did an interesting little jig at Euston. In very short order, they were passing King's Cross and then Angel stations. Harry slowed considerably at that point, and crept forward. Finally, they came across a platform that said 'City Road Station'.

"This wasn't here before," Harry muttered. "Damned one way charms." They were greeted by one of the foulest smells they had ever encountered. For Harry, it was a familiar one.

"Oh hell," Cedric said as he looked further onto the platform. "They have a troll in there." Fleur blanched, but Harry just began to laugh.

"Oh my god," he gasped. "I wonder if either Dumbledore or McGonagall had a hand in this challenge?"

"'Ow can you laugh at a time like zis!" Fleur shrieked in fear.

"Because three first years defeated a troll once," he replied. "First years."

Cedric's eyes were huge. "You mean that rumour was *true*? You, Granger and Weasley killed a troll that Halloween?"

Harry frowned. "I don't think we killed it, although my stunner up the nose might have hurt it badly. Between that and Ron dropping its own club on its head, we brought it down."

Cedric and Fleur were looking at him in awe. "What? As McGonagall said, it was sheer, dumb luck." Cedric grinned slightly as Harry accidentally slipped into the Transfiguration teacher's brogue.

"So, what do we do?" Fleur asked.

"Well, I'm not really in favour of sticking my wand up this one's nose, but I'm betting three simultaneous Stunners might well do the job." A few moments later, he was proven correct, and they looked behind it. There sat the Tri-Wizard Cup.

Before they could move, Harry frowned. "Is it me, or were these challenges too easy?"

Cedric laughed uproariously. "Harry, for the three of us together they may have been simple, but I guarantee that alone, we'd have had a considerably harder time of it. I couldn't have laid that troll low that easily alone."

"E is right, 'Arry," Fleur said. "Ze t'ree of us solved zem much easier zan one of us would 'ave."

He nodded. "Okay, that makes sense. So, shall we grab it?" He took a step forward, but jumped suddenly as her hand shot out and quickly patted his buttocks.

"Oh, you meant ze Cup!" she said innocently. Cedric, who had only just gotten over his laughing bout from Harry's comments about how easy the challenges had been, lost it again.

Finally, the three of them were able to stand before the Cup, admiring its gentle magical glow. They met each others eyes and then each one grasped one of the three handles evenly spaced around the Cup. The Portkey function activated.

Where they landed was not at the school, however. The mountains that were always in the distance at the school were nowhere to be seen. "I 'ave a bad feeling about zis," Fleur said softly. "I zought zat we were to be returned to ze school once we found ze Cup."

"We were," Cedric said. "Wands out, d'you reckon?" he asked Harry, who nodded.

They stayed together as they rounded a large piece of what appeared to be statuary. Harry had the oddest feeling of being watched.

His face drained of all blood as he saw what the statue was. It was an angel, hands raised in supplication, standing behind a flat slab that stated a family name and some names beneath it. The name was Riddle.

"Shit! Get to the Cup!" he cried. "Do it now!"

"Why?" Cedric asked.

"Voldemort!" he screamed. "Now!" They leapt toward the Cup, but were stopped in mid-air. Without a second thought, Harry Summoned the Cup, which struck Fleur and Cedric simultaneously, making them disappear. The grip holding him back released suddenly, and he fell to the ground. He rose and shrugged off his pack, both to get free movement and to access the items he had in there. His invisibility cloak would surely be of use right about now. He had only got as far as fumbling one-handed for the zipper when he realised he was no longer alone.

"It's just us now, Potter," a high reedy voice exclaimed. Someone enclosed in a deep dark cloak walked out from between two large headstones carrying a writhing bundle.

"Is everyone in this wizarding world stupid?" he growled through the sudden explosion of pain in his head at the sight of the bundle. He followed this with a loud painful "Oof!" as he was slammed into the angel statue hard enough that he thought that he felt something break as the scabbarded sword was trapped between his body and the stone. His wand slipped from his nerveless fingers to fall into the grass nearby.

"Do not talk to your executioner that way if you wish a painless death," the voice wheezed.

"As if you were going to give me a painless one, Tommie," Harry grunted through his pain. "You were a cruel bastard as a sixteen year old, so I doubt you've improved any since then."

"Do it now!" the reedy voice screamed angrily. The bundle was placed at Harry's feet as the arms of the angel came down and gripped him tightly, proving to him once and for all that his ribs were

in fact broken. A foul rag was jammed in Harry's mouth to prevent him from speaking.

Harry could hear noises at his feet. He looked down and saw a gigantic snake slithering through the grass, circling the headstone where he was held. The robed person's breathing was growing louder again. It sounded as though he or she was forcing something heavy across the ground. Then he (Harry decided) came back within Harry's range of vision, and Harry saw him pushing a stone cauldron to the foot of the grave. It was full of some kind of liquid - Harry could hear it slopping around - and it was larger than any cauldron Harry had ever used; a great stone belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in.

The thing inside the bundle of robes on the ground was stirring more persistently, as though it was trying to free itself. Now the robed man was busying himself at the bottom of the cauldron with a wand. Suddenly there were crackling flames beneath it. The large snake slithered away into the darkness.

The liquid in the cauldron seemed to heat very fast. The surface began not only to bubble, but to send out fiery sparks, as though it were on fire. Steam was thickening, blurring the outline of whomever was tending the fire. The movements beneath the robes became more agitated. And Harry heard the high, cold voice again.

"Hurry!" A table was quickly Conjured, and two small objects came from within the person's robes and were placed there. To Harry's eyes, they looked like a small cup with some type of emblem on it and a ring. He could see nothing more of them in his current straits.

The whole surface of the water was alight with sparks now. It might have been encrusted with diamonds.

"It is ready. Master."

"Now ..." said the cold voice.

The figure flipped back their cowl and was faced with a tall, beautiful woman, with the cruellest face he had ever seen. She had long black hair, and reminded him uncomfortably of his stepfather. She pulled open the robes on the ground, revealing what was inside them, and

Harry let out a yell that was strangled in the wad of material blocking his mouth.

It was as though she had flipped over a stone and revealed something ugly, slimy, and blind - but worse, a hundred times worse. The thing the woman had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly – a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face – no child alive ever had a face like that - flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes.

The thing seemed almost helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around her neck, and she lifted it. As she did so, Harry saw the look of adoration on her face in the firelight as she carried the creature to the rim of the cauldron. For one moment, Harry saw the evil, flat face illuminated in the sparks dancing on the surface of the potion. And then she lowered the creature into the cauldron. There was a hiss, and it vanished below the surface. Harry heard its frail body hit the bottom with a soft thud.

Let it drown, Harry thought, his scar burning almost past endurance, please ... let it drown ...

The woman was speaking. Her voice throbbed with an emotion that Harry had problems placing in this situation. When he did place it, it was only the knowledge that the rag was there that kept him from vomiting – the woman sounded as if she were nearing an orgasm!

She raised her wand, closed his eyes, and spoke to the night.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

The surface of the grave at Harry's feet cracked. Horrified, Harry watched as a fine trickle of dust rose into the air at her command and fell softly into the cauldron. The diamond surface of the water broke and hissed; it sent sparks in all directions and turned a vivid, poisonous-looking blue.

And now she was shivering. She pulled a long, thin, shining silver dagger from inside her cloak. Her voice was deep with emotion.

"Flesh of the servant, willingly given, you will revive your master."

She stretched her right hand out before her, over the cauldron, and swung the dagger upward, shivering as if in anticipation. Harry realized what she was about to do a second before it happened. He closed his eyes as tightly as he could, but he could not block the scream that pierced the night, that went through Harry as though he had been stabbed with the dagger too. He heard a sickening splash, as something was dropped into the cauldron. He also heard moans coming from the woman that sounded rather familiar to ones he had heard from Fleur.

Harry couldn't stand to look ... but the potion had turned a burning red; the light of it shone through Harry's closed eyelids.

It was when he heard the steps in front of himself that Harry opened his eyes to see the woman standing before him, eyes glowing with madness. She held up the dagger again and then stabbed him roughly in the left bicep. It wasn't deep, but it was certainly enough. Blood began to flow from the wound, which she caught in a vial that she pulled from her cleavage.

She walked back to the cauldron with Harry's blood, pouring it inside. "Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe!" The liquid within turned, instantly, a blinding white. She knelt on the ground before the cauldron in a pose of supplication, cradling her wounded arm.

The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks in all directions, so blindingly bright that it turned all else to velvety blackness. Nothing happened ...

Let it have drowned. Harry thought, let it have gone wrong ..

And then, suddenly, the sparks emanating from the cauldron were extinguished. A surge of white steam billowed thickly from the cauldron instead, obliterating everything in front of Harry, so that he couldn't see anything but vapour hanging in the air. ... *It's gone wrong*, he thought. ... *it's drowned. .. please . . . please let it be dead. ...*

But then, through the mist in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin, rising slowly from inside the cauldron. The woman on the ground before the cauldron moaned and began to shudder, and Harry wondered if he'd ever be able to think of sex without becoming physically ill ...

"Robe me," said the high, cold voice from behind the steam, and the woman, still moaning the last of her orgasm, scrambled to pick up the black robes from the ground. She got to her feet, reached up, and pulled them one-handed over her master's head.

The thin man stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry ... and Harry stared back into the face that had haunted his nightmares for three years. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes and a nose that was flat as a snake's, with slits for nostrils ... pain exploded again inside Harry's skull as their eyes met.

Lord Voldemort had risen again.

Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cat's, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. Voldemort slipped one of those unnaturally long-fingered hands into a deep pocket and drew out a wand. He caressed it gently too; and then he raised it, and pointed it at the woman, who glided toward him.

"Yes, Master," she sighed. "I am yours to command, as I have always been, and always shall be."

"Delightful, Bellatrix. Meet your cousin, dear one. He is the adopted child of your cousin Sirius."

"Blood traitor," she barked in disgust. "What may I do with him? Or am I to do anything with him?"

Voldemort's face took on an even crueller cast than before, and his red eyes shone brightly in the darkness. "I think our young friend finds you attractive, dear Bella. Perhaps you could fulfil one of his

fantasies before he dies." A flick of the wand drew the rag from Harry's mouth. "What do you think, Harry?" Voldemort asked. "A chance to experience the passions that no mudblood or beast can give you. A chance to have a real pureblooded lover – someone deserving of your attentions."

"When hell freezes over, you freak," Harry spat. A fist struck his jaw and blood flew from his mouth.

"*Crucio*," Voldemort said blandly, and Bellatrix fell to the ground, screaming. It was only held for a moment, however. "I forgot – that's foreplay for you, isn't it, my darling?" She lay on the ground panting. "Still, the point is made. Strike him only when I permit it, Bella. I have punishments that you will *not* enjoy." She nodded in understanding.

"Stand, beloved," was his next statement. "Give me your right arm." She held out the bloody stump to him. Voldemort raised his wand again and whirled it through the air. A streak of what looked like molten silver hung shining in the wand's wake. Momentarily shapeless, it writhed and then formed itself into a gleaming replica of a human hand, bright as moonlight, which soared downward and fixed itself upon Bella's bleeding wrist.

She inhaled deeply, raised her head and stared in disbelief at the silver hand, now attached seamlessly to her arm as though it was a dazzling glove. She flexed the shining fingers, then picked up a small twig on the ground and crushed it into powder. A grin split her face.

"My Lord," she whispered. "Master ... it is beautiful ... thank you ... thank you ..." She knelt before him and kissed the hem of his robes.

"Now you are properly equipped to pleasure our young guest, are you not?" In answer, she stood and undid the fastenings on her robe, which fell away to expose a body that Harry would not have failed to respond to in circumstances less desperate than this. She was deeply desirable, physically speaking, to the point where he wondered if there was Veela blood within her veins. With a gesture of her silver hand, she vanished his clothing. For a moment, he was afraid that the scabbarded Sword, which was still pinned between his body and the statue, would also disappear to who knew where, but it resisted vanishing, although the strap he used to fasten it across his

chest did disappear. The Sword itself slithered quietly down to lie at the feet of the angel, out of reach although only inches away from him. Fortunately Bellatrix seemed to be more focused on ... other things, and did not notice.

A cool breeze played across Harry's skin, and he found himself fighting an inappropriate and wholly involuntary response to his sudden nudity. Displeased by his resistance, Bella whispered another spell, and Harry's body betrayed him by re-routing blood to his organ, which stood at attention for her.

She looked at Voldemort, who simply said, "Do not hurt him, Bella. Pleasure him. He does not react the way that you do to pain." She nodded and dropped to her knees before Harry.

Harry found himself mildly proud that she seemed impressed with his traitorous member, which was a dark red colour and inches away from her mouth. She proceeded to use her tongue to blaze a trail from scrotum to tip, leaving him quivering. He watched her fingers play with her nipples as the silver hand gently grasped him as she engulfed him with her mouth and proved that sex was at least her avocation, if not her vocation. He exploded quickly as she stroked and sucked, and she swallowed his release.

He spent the next hour doing things he'd never dreamed of before, and hating himself for not being strong enough to fight the spells forcing him to enjoy what was being done to him. Released from the angel's stone grip, he was thrown down into the long grass, where Bellatrix continued to have her way with him, keeping him pinned with the inhuman strength of her silver hand around his throat. As she finally climbed off him, she sighed contentedly. His multiple releases, magically enhanced, ran down her thighs. He could feel the spell continuing to work, and knew that his body was going to betray him yet again within minutes, even if no one cast the spells for more immediate recovery.

Bellatrix pulled him to his feet and slammed him back up against the angel again, where the stone arms once again enfolded him while she dressed in her robes and waited for what would follow. Voldemort slid Bella's left sleeve up lovingly, and gently pressed his wand to the

tattoo there – a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth. She hissed in pain, and Harry could see her eyes glaze in rapture. Pain exploded in his own head, and he nearly passed out. A look of cruel satisfaction on his face, Voldemort straightened up, threw back his head, and stared around at the dark graveyard.

"How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?" he whispered, his gleaming red eyes fixed upon the stars. "And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?" He began to pace up and down before Harry, eyes sweeping the graveyard all the while. After a minute or so, he looked down at Harry again, a cruel smile twisting his snakelike face.

"You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father," he hissed softly. "A Muggle and a fool... very like your dear mother. I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death. Perhaps yours can prove useful with her death. I look forward to finding out."

Voldemort laughed again. Up and down he paced, looking all around him as he walked, and the snake continued to circle in the grass.

"You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village, fell in love with him. But he abandoned her when she told him what she was. ... he didn't like magic, my father ..."

"He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born. Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage ... but I vowed to find him ... I revenged myself upon him, that fool who gave me his name ... Tom Riddle ..."

Still he paced, his red eyes darting from grave to grave.

"Listen to me, reliving family history ..." he said quietly, "why, I am growing quite sentimental ... but look, Harry! My true family returns ..."

The air was suddenly full of the swishing of cloaks. Between graves, behind the yew tree, in every shadowy space, wizards were Apparating. All of them were hooded and masked. And one by one

they moved forward ... slowly, cautiously, as though they could hardly believe their eyes. Voldemort stood in silence, waiting for them. Then one of the Death Eaters fell to his knees, crawled toward Voldemort and kissed the hem of his black robes.

"Master . . . Master" he murmured.

The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them approaching Voldemort on his knees and kissing his robes, before backing away and standing up, forming a silent circle, which enclosed Tom Riddle's grave, Harry, Voldemort, and Bellatrix. Yet they left gaps in the circle, as though waiting for more people. Voldemort, however, did not seem to expect more. He looked around at the hooded faces, and though there was no wind rustling seemed to run around the circle, as though it had shivered.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," said Voldemort quietly. "Thirteen years ... thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday, we are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?"

He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening.

"I smell guilt," he stated. "There is a stench of guilt upon the air."

A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed, but did not dare to step back from him.

"I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact - such prompt appearances! and I ask myself ... why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?"

No one spoke. No one moved. No one dared.

"And I answer myself," whispered Voldemort, "they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment ..."

"And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort ... perhaps they now pay allegiance to another ... perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?"

At the mention of Dumbledore's name, the members of the circle stirred, and some muttered and shook their heads. Voldemort ignored them. "It is a disappointment to me ... I confess myself disappointed ..."

One of the men suddenly flung himself forward, breaking the circle. Trembling from head to foot, he collapsed at Voldemort's feet. "Master!" he shrieked, "Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!"

Voldemort began to laugh. He raised his wand. "*Crucio!*" The Death Eater on the ground writhed and shrieked.

Harry was sure the sound must carry to the houses around ... *let the Muggle police come*, he thought desperately. ... *anyone ... anything ...*

Voldemort raised his wand. The tortured Death Eater lay flat upon the ground, gasping. "Get up, Avery," said Voldemort softly. "Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years ... I want thirteen years' repayment before I forgive you." He continued to walk the circle.

"Lucius, my slippery friend," he whispered, halting before him. "I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius. Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay ... but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord, I was constantly on the alert," came Lucius Malfoy's voice swiftly from beneath the hood. "Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me -"

"And yet you fell afoul of a simple house elf?" asked Voldemort lazily. Malfoy stopped talking abruptly. "Yes, I know all about that, Lucius. You have disappointed me. I expect more faithful service in the future." This last was delivered with a voice that promised that the Cruciatus Curse would be only the beginning.

"Of course, my Lord, of course. You are merciful, thank you."

He looked at an empty spot. "Bartemius Crouch Junior should be here, but he went to Azkaban for me. As did Bellatrix, but she is far more cunning than Crouch could ever hope to be. Alas, the same can not be said for her husband, who died in the citadel." Bellatrix responded by walking over to Harry and pressing against him after a nod from Voldemort.

"If you but join us, I can be yours every night, young Harry," she murmured. She laughed deeply within her throat as he pulsed against her stomach, and he felt his own gorge rise slightly at how much he still wanted her body, despite the humiliation.

Voldemort seemed to ignore Bella's comments to Harry as he continued to walk the circle, stopping here to speak to Walden Macnair and there to speak to the elder Crabbe and to Goyle's father. He stopped before another large gap. "Many have died in my service. Rudolphus Lestranger. Evan Rosier. Augustus Rookwood. Some choose not to return to me, however. One is on the run, and shall be dealt with. Others, however, have already returned to me and work for me already." He walked to Bellatrix and ran his hand along her shapely rear end, making her shiver. "Bella, for example. There are others, and they do my bidding where they will, at my command."

"One is at Hogwarts, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight. Yes," said Voldemort, a grin curling his lipless mouth as the eyes of the circle flashed in Harry's direction. "Harry Potter has kindly joined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honour."

There was a silence, broken by Harry's softly defiant "Black, you half-blooded jack-ass." Harry quickly followed this with a prolonged bout of screaming as Voldemort held him under the Cruciatus for easily half a minute.

It was pain beyond anything Harry had ever experienced. His very bones felt on fire; his head was surely splitting along his scar; his eyes were rolling madly in his head; he wanted it to end ... to black out ... to die ...

And then it was gone. He was hanging limply in the ropes binding him to the headstone of Voldemort's father, looking up into those bright red eyes through a kind of mist. The night was ringing with the sound of the Death Eaters' laughter.

He came to himself again, disgusted that Bella had seen fit to 'help' him with his magically induced erection, and had been performing fellatio on him while he had been under such intense pain. What was worse, she had successfully brought him to the expected conclusion of such an activity during the curse.

Lucius Malfoy's voice came from the circle. "Master, we crave to know ... we beg you to tell us ... how you have achieved this ... this miracle ... how you managed to return to us."

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius," said Voldemort. "And it begins – and ends – with my young friend here."

He walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, so that the eyes of the whole circle were upon the two of them. The snake continued to circle.

"You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?" Voldemort said softly, his red eyes upon Harry, whose scar began to burn so fiercely that he almost screamed in agony. "You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him. A simple house elf leapt before the curse, invoking a deep and ancient magic that I had not considered to that point. Her love and care for this child caused the curse to rebound upon me, separating me from my earthly form. I could not touch him. Ah, but I can touch him now." The impossibly long forefinger of his right hand came forward and pressed tightly against Harry's scar, and Harry lost consciousness in a haze of

pain, having not yet recovered from the effects of the Cruciatus moments before.

He awakened to fight Voldemort shaking a finger at him. "I did not give you permission to sleep, Harry. Don't do it again, or I run the risk of becoming ... cross."

He turned back to his Death Eaters. "I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it. My curse was deflected by the damned elf's foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded. Aaah ... pain beyond pain, my friends; nothing could have prepared me for it. I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost ... but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know ... I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal – to conquer death. And now, I was tested, and it appeared that one or more of my experiments had worked ... for I had not been killed, though the curse should have done it. Nevertheless, I was as powerless as the weakest creature alive, and without the means to help myself ... for I had no body, and every spell that might have helped me required the use of a wand."

"I remember only forcing myself, sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist. I settled in a faraway place, in a forest, and I waited. Surely one of my faithful Death Eaters would try and find me ... one of them would certainly come and perform the magic I could not, to restore me to a body ... but I waited in vain." His look held darkness for the assembled people, and a shiver ran once more around the circle of listening Death Eaters. Voldemort let the silence spiral horribly before continuing.

"Only one power remained to me. I could possess the bodies of others. But I dared not go where other humans were plentiful, for I knew that the Aurors were still abroad and searching for me"

"I sometimes inhabited animals - snakes, of course, being my preference - but I was little better off inside them than as pure spirit, for their bodies were ill adapted to perform magic . . . and my possession of them shortened their lives; none of them lasted long. . . .

"Then ... four years ago ... the means for my return seemed assured. A wizard – young, foolish, and gullible – wandered across my path in the forest I had made my home. Oh, he seemed the very chance I had been dreaming of ... for he was a teacher at Dumbledore's school ... he was easy to bend to my will ... he brought me back to this country, and after a while, I took possession of his body, to supervise him closely as he carried out my orders. But my plan failed. I did not manage to steal the Philosopher's Stone. I was not to be assured immortal life. I was thwarted ... thwarted, once again, by Harry Potter."

Silence once more; nothing was stirring, and even the snake had ceased its endless circling. The Death Eaters were quite motionless, the glittering eyes in their masks fixed upon Voldemort, and upon Harry.

"The servant died when I left his body, and I was left as weak as ever I had been," Voldemort continued. "I returned to my hiding place far away, and I will not pretend to you that I didn't then fear that I might never regain my powers. Yes, that was perhaps my darkest hour ... I could not hope that I would be sent another wizard to possess ... and I had given up hope, now, that any of my Death Eaters cared what had become of me."

One or two of the masked wizards in the circle moved uncomfortably, but Voldemort appeared to take no notice.

"And then, when I had almost given up hope, my truest Death Eater returned to me. She risked everything to escape Azkaban for me. She made her way to me as she always has, and found a means to return me to a form of half-life, with the help of our Hogwarts connection. None will suspect him."

"And then fortune smiled upon Lord Voldemort, reminding me why I will be victorious in the end. Word came about the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Now, I could have chosen to be reborn by using anyone's blood – any who call me enemy. But I knew that the only one that would be sufficient would be the source of my original defeat."

"There was no hope of stealing the Sorcerer's Stone any more, for I knew that Dumbledore would have seen to it that it was destroyed. But I was willing to embrace mortal life again, before chasing immortality. I set my sights lower ... I would settle for my old body back again, and my old strength."

"I knew that to achieve this - it is an old piece of Dark Magic, the potion that revived me tonight - I would need three powerful ingredients. Well, one of them was already at hand, was it not, Bella? Flesh given by a servant."

"Gladly, my lord. All I have, and more."

"My father's bone, naturally, meant that we would have to come here, where he was buried. But the blood of a foe. I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Harry Potter's blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago ... for the lingering protection that damnable house elf once gave him would then reside in my veins too."

"But how to get at Harry Potter? For he has been better protected than I think even he knows, protected in ways devised by Dumbledore long ago. He is protected by his family, although the lovely hatred that his grandfather holds for him has helped to weaken that. His father is barely better. And then the boy would return to Hogwarts, where he is under the crooked nose of that Muggle-loving fool from morning until night. So how could I take him?"

"That is where my Hogwarts agent came in. He Confounded the Goblet to spit out Harry's name." He turned to Harry. "I must thank you for destroying the Goblet in your tantrum, otherwise the game might well have been up before it started."

"Glad to have been of service, you half-blooded imbecile. You chose my blood out of fear. I have some protections in it, or else you'd not have been in pain when Quirrell happened. You want those same protections. You fear death – it's why you 'chase immortality'. You will continue to talk to these morons and tout how magnificent you are, all the time scared that they will come to know what a fraud you are and depose you and kill you like the rabid dog that you are."

"Brave words from someone who is about to die, Potter."

"As you say, I'm going to die. So why hold it in? Besides, even if my biological father is too scared to say anything to you, I'm betting he's horrified that he's pledged his allegiance to an inhuman half-blooded monstrosity like you. My name is Harry James Black. I am the son of Lily Evans Black and Sirius Orion Black. I am the bastard child of one of these wastes of sperm, and I don't personally care which one it is. You may as well kill me, because I will never serve you willingly."

He expected an explosion, given the rage burning behind the self-styled Lord's eyes, but he was surprised to hear a sudden laugh. "You see, I think, how foolish it was to suppose that this boy could ever have been stronger than me," said Voldemort. "But I want there to be no mistake in anybody's mind. Harry *Potter* escaped me by a lucky chance. And I am now going to prove my power by killing him, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help him, no house elf to die for him, and nothing but false bravado to armour him. I will give him his chance. He will be allowed to fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger." He looked down. "Just a little longer, Nagini," Voldemort whispered, and the snake glided away through the grass to where the Death Eaters stood watching. "Give him his wand."

Bellatrix summoned the holly and phoenix feather wand and slapped it angrily into Harry's hand. "You reject the greatest man ever to grace this planet. I had hoped better of you."

"Whereas I expected nothing less from you," Harry replied softly.

She backhanded him easily. "I will ask to perform such things upon your corpse upon your death that it will enter the history books."

"Whereas I will pray for your soul when you die," Harry said. The look of rage on her face was beyond measure.

"You have been taught how to duel. Harry Potter?" said Voldemort softly, his red eyes glinting through the darkness. Harry sneered and nodded.

"We bow to each other. Harry," said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his snakelike face upturned to Harry. "Come, the niceties must be observed. Dumbledore would like you to show manners. Bow to death, Harry."

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Voldemort's lipless mouth was smiling. Harry did not bow. He was not going to let Voldemort play with him before killing him ... he was not going to give him that satisfaction. "Why should I bow? So that you can pull a Malfoy on me?" There was a hiss from one of the Death Eaters. "After all, Draco had to have learned his bad manners from somewhere." He could see the masked man's hand twitching, as if he wanted to drop his wand into it and curse Harry into oblivion.

"I said, bow," Voldemort said, raising his wand, his eyes flashing angrily. Harry felt his spine curve as though a huge, invisible hand were bending him ruthlessly forward, and the Death Eaters laughed harder than ever. "Very good," said Voldemort softly, and as he raised his wand the pressure bearing down upon Harry lifted too. "And now you face me, like a man."

"And now - we duel." Voldemort raised his wand, and before Harry could do anything to defend himself, before he could even move, he had been hit again by the Cruciatus Curse. The pain was so intense, so all-consuming, that he no longer knew where he was. White-hot knives were piercing every inch of his skin – his head was surely going to burst with pain – he was screaming louder than he'd ever screamed in his life.

And then it stopped. Harry rolled over and scrambled to his feet; he was shaking uncontrollably; he staggered sideways into the wall of watching Death Eaters, and they pushed him away, back toward Voldemort.

"A little break," said Voldemort, the slit-like nostrils dilating with excitement, "a little pause ... That hurt, didn't it. Harry? You don't want me to do that again, do you?"

Harry didn't answer. He was going to die like a mad dog, those pitiless red eyes were telling him so ... he was going to die, and there

was nothing he could do about it ... but he wasn't going to play along. He wasn't going to obey Voldemort ... he wasn't going to beg.

"I asked you whether you want me to do that again," said Voldemort softly. "Answer me! *Imperio!*"

Harry felt the sensation that his mind had been wiped of all thought. It was bliss, not to think, it was as though he were floating, dreaming ... just answer no ... say no ... just answer no ...

I will not, said a stronger voice, in the back of his head, *I won't answer*.

Just answer no ...

I won't do it, I won't say it. ...

Just answer no ...

"I WON'T!"

And these words burst from Harry's mouth; they echoed through the graveyard, and the dream state was lifted as suddenly as though cold water had been thrown over him - back rushed the aches that the Cruciatus Curse had left all over his body - back rushed the realization of where he was, and what he was facing.

"You won't?" said Voldemort dangerously, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now. "You won't say no? Harry, obedience is a virtue I need to teach you before you die. Perhaps another little dose of pain?"

Voldemort raised his wand, but this time Harry was ready; with the reflexes born of his Quidditch training, he flung himself sideways onto the ground; he rolled behind the marble headstone of Voldemort's father, and he heard it crack as the curse missed him.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort's soft, cold voice, drawing nearer, as the Death Eaters laughed. "You cannot hide from me. Does this mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out,

Harry ... come out and play, then ... it will be quick ... it might even be painless ... I would not know ... I have never died ..."

"That can be changed," Harry grumbled. He whispered "*Accio* sword," and the sword of Gryffindor flew across the graveyard to him.

"Bravado is unbecoming a corpse," Voldemort hissed. "Now come out and face your death like a man, with sword or wand."

"In other words, step out from behind this stone and let you fire at me without a chance to defend myself. You sure you're not a Malfoy instead of a Riddle?" Harry laughed with no sense of finding any humour in it.

"Very amusing, boy," Voldemort drawled. "I will promise you that you can even have the very first spell fired. I would make it a good one, were I you."

Harry leapt from behind the stone and fired a Blasting curse at Voldemort's chest, using both wand and sword. He could see the look of grudging admiration mixed in with surprise as the self-styled dark lord leapt out of the way. Harry fired several more, causing the Death Eaters to dive for cover, and then dove behind another headstone.

He found himself close to the small table with the odd items on it. Reasoning that they must be important for some reason, he quickly summoned them to himself and ducked again. Another roll, another Blast, another sheltering headstone, and now he was close to where his pack lay forgotten in the long grass. "*Accio* pack," he murmured, and it slithered to his side. The zipper was slightly undone, so he simply stuffed the cup and ring through the opening. If he had any chance at all of escaping, he would do his best to take Voldemort's toys with him.

He could hear Voldemort coming closer, so he leapt from behind the stone, screaming "*Expelliarmus!*" at the same moment that Voldemort yelled "*Avada Kedavra!*" A jet of green light issued from Voldemorts wand just as a jet of red light blasted from Harry's. They met in midair and suddenly Harry's wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it; his hand seized up around it; he couldn't have released it if he'd wanted to - and a narrow beam of

light connected the two wands, neither red nor green, but a bright, deep gold. Harry, following the beam with his astonished gaze, saw that Voldemort's long white fingers too were gripping a wand that was shaking and vibrating.

And then he felt his feet lift from the ground. Nothing could have prepared him for this happening. He and Voldemort were both being raised into the air, their wands still connected by that thread of shimmering golden light. They glided away from the tombstone of Voldemort's father and then came to rest on a patch of ground that was clear and free of graves. The Death Eaters were shouting. They were asking Voldemort for instructions. They were closing in, reforming the circle around Harry and Voldemort, the snake slithering at their heels, some of them drawing their wands.

The golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered. Though the wands remained connected, a thousand more beams arced high over Harry and Voldemort, crisscrossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light, beyond which the Death Eaters circled like jackals, their cries strangely muffled now.

"Do nothing!" Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters, and Harry saw his red eyes wide with astonishment at what was happening, saw him fighting to break the thread of light still connecting his wand with Harry's; Harry held onto his wand more tightly, with both hands, and the golden thread remained unbroken. "Do nothing unless I command you!" Voldemort shouted to the Death Eaters.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air. It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating around Harry and Voldemort. It was a sound Harry recognized immediately: phoenix song.

It was the sound of hope to Harry ... the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life. He felt as though the song were inside him instead of just around him. It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore, and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear.

Don't break the connection.

I know. Harry told the music, *I know I mustn't* ... but no sooner had he thought it, than the thing became much harder to do. His wand began to vibrate more powerfully than ever ... and now the beam between him and Voldemort changed too ... it was as though large beads of light were sliding up and down the thread connecting the wands. Harry felt his wand give a shudder under his hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily his way. The direction of the beams movement was now toward him, from Voldemort, and he felt his wand shudder angrily.

As the closest bead of light moved nearer to Harry's wand tip, the wood beneath his fingers grew so hot he feared it would burst into flame. The closer that bead moved, the harder Harry's wand vibrated; he was sure his wand would not survive contact with it; it felt as though it was about to shatter under his fingers.

He concentrated every last particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song, his eyes furious, fixed ... and slowly, very slowly, the beads quivered to a halt, and then, just as slowly, they began to move the other way ... and now it was Voldemort's wand that was vibrating extra-hard now. Voldemort who looked astonished, and almost fearful.

One of the beads of light was quivering, inches from the tip of Voldemort's wand. Harry didn't understand why he was doing it, didn't know what it might achieve, but he now concentrated as he had never done in his life on forcing that bead of light right back into Voldemort's wand ... and slowly ... very slowly ... it moved along the golden thread ... it trembled for a moment ... and then it connected.

At once, Voldemort's wand began to emit echoing screams of pain ... then – Voldemort's red eyes widened with shock – a dense, smoky hand flew out of the tip of it and vanished, the ghost of the hand he had made Bellatrix. There were more shouts of pain, and then something much larger began to blossom from Voldemort's wand tip, a great, greyish something, that looked as though it were made of the solidest, densest smoke. ... It was a head ... now a chest and arms ...

If ever Harry might have released his wand from shock, it would have been then, but instinct kept him clutching his wand tightly, so that the

thread of golden light remained unbroken, even though the thick grey ghost of this man (was it a ghost? it looked so solid) emerged in its entirety from the end of Voldemort's wand, as though it were squeezing itself out of a very narrow tunnel ... and this shade stood up, and looked up and down the golden thread of light, and spoke.

"So he was a real wizard, then?" the old man said, his eyes on Voldemort. "Killed me, that one did. You fight him, boy."

More screams of pain from the wand ... and then something else emerged from its tip ... the dense shadow of a second head, quickly followed by arms and torso ... and this head, gray as a smoky statue, was a woman's. Harry, both arms shaking now as he fought to keep his wand still, saw her drop to the ground and straighten up like the others, staring.

The shadow of this woman surveyed the battle before her with wide eyes. "Don't let go, now!" she cried, and her voice echoed like the man's, as though from very far away. "Don't let him get you, Harry - don't let go!"

She and the male figure began to pace around the inner walls of the golden web, while the Death Eaters flitted around the outside of it. Voldemort's dead victims whispered as they circled the duellers, whispered words of encouragement to Harry, and hissed words Harry couldn't hear to Voldemort.

And now another head was emerging from the tip of Voldemort's wand ... and Harry knew when he saw it who it would be ... he knew, as though he had expected it from the moment when the unknown man had appeared from the wand ...

The head of a house elf slipped from the wand, and she quickly stood to face Harry. "Master Harry is a fine wizard, and Mombi is glad to have saved him. But Master Harry is not yet ready to face ugly dark lord," she whispered softly. "When the connection breaks, Master Harry must think very hard about where he wants to be. He must want it with all his heart."

The old man spoke. "We'll stall him – we can't do it for more than a few seconds, son, but it should be enough. Get away. Train. Make the bastard pay."

"I will," Harry grimaced. "Somehow, I will. I swear it."

"Mombi knows that Master Harry will succeed." She reached out and touched him with her ghostly hand, and suddenly the knowledge of exactly what she needed him to do to make it out alive was in him. "Go, Master Harry ... do it now ... do it now ..."

"NOW!" Harry yelled; he didn't think he could have held on for another moment anyway. He pulled his wand upward with an almighty wrench, and the golden thread broke; the cage of light vanished, the phoenix song died - but the shadowy figures of Voldemort's victims did not disappear - they were closing in upon Voldemort, shielding Harry from his gaze ...

"*Accio PACK!*" Harry shouted, and the pack leapt into his arms from where it lay in the shadow of a headstone. Wand in one hand, sword in the other, Harry wrapped his arms around it and thought hard about where he wanted to be – he wanted to be at Hogwarts, with Hermione and Ginny and Fleur – he wanted to know that they all were all right – he wanted them to know that evil was back with a vengeance – he needed to be with them ...

With a wrenching feeling like none he had ever felt before, he was gone, just as he heard Voldemort's unholy scream of rage.

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He felt as if he were being turned inside out – but it still felt better than being a victim of the Cruciatus. Suddenly the sensation stopped and he found himself falling. Pain erupted in his back as he impacted with a hard surface.

"Harry's back!" voices shouted. He could hear movement near him, but he was fighting too hard to remain conscious to pay attention to actually seeing.

"He *is* back," Harry gasped. "Voldemort has returned." This was the last thing he said before losing the fight to remain conscious.

He came aware for just a moment in the hospital wing, long enough to hear "... naked in the Great Hall, for Merlin's sake!" from a voice that he placed as his 'grandfather', James Potter.

When he awoke for longer than a few seconds, he found himself alone in the hospital wing, except for one person – Albus Dumbledore. "Welcome back to the living, Harry."

"He's back, Professor!"

"Yes Harry, I believe you, although many at the Ministry are taking your comments to be the delirious ramblings of a young man."

"What about Fleur and Cedric? Haven't they been able to tell you *anything*?"

"They did not see enough to be able to tell us anything definitive," Dumbledore replied.

"Lovely. So we have the attention seeking Death Eater spawn appearing naked in the Great Hall, saying that Voldemort is back, and no proof that what I say happened actually happened. Fudge is going to love that. Letting the discrediting schemes begin!"

"I do not believe that it will go so far as you believe, Harry. While he is a petty man, he is also smart enough to avoid doing anything quite so obvious."

"How long have I been out, by the way?" Harry asked.

"It is now the first day of June. You have come in and out of consciousness many times for extremely brief moments. It was quite the scenario you experienced, obviously."

"Yeah. Get gouged open to return a dark lord to a physical body, get raped repeatedly by Bellatrix Lestrange, and finally, duel Voldemort and escape by the skin of my teeth. Then appear naked in the Great Hall, which I have roundly been ridiculed for by Professor Potter's

father, I expect, since I heard him complaining about it during one of my brief waking moments." Harry scowled. "I am so looking forward to turning seventeen, when I can officially be disinherited by that family."

"There is a problem with that," the Headmaster said. "I will leave that for your mother to explain, however. She should be here shortly." At that moment, heels clicked in the hallway, and Lily popped around the doorway.

"Harry!" she cried, and ran to the bed. Albus moved out of the way at a surprisingly fast rate for such an elderly man, but that was likely self-preservation kicking in.

"I'm sorry I worried you, Mum."

"I was just so scared! So were Sirius and ... and your father," she said. "I'm sorry to spring it on you like this, but ... I cast the charm while you were unconscious, and we now know who your father is. James Potter VI."

Harry stared at her for a long moment. "Can you cast that in front of me, Mum? I ... I don't want you to think that I'm calling you a liar, but ... I need ... I need to see this for myself, you know?"

"I understand," Lily said softly. She pulled her wand and pointed it at Harry. "*Fateor Paternitum*," she intoned. A fine golden mist spread across Harry for a moment, before settling into his skin. A few moments passed before the mist reappeared and coalesced above his head. He moved so that he could see the words better. It read "Mother: Lily Evans Potter Black. Father: James Harold Potter VI."

Harry looked at it for a long moment. "So, has anyone bothered to check his arms?" he finally asked, all emotion completely undetectable. "After all, there must be a reason he was so certain that I was the child of a Death Eater." He turned to the Headmaster. "I see why you didn't quite want to say anything. I can't see that it changes anything, really. My biological grandfather has always hated me, and does not want me in the family. I'm actually strongly of a mind to get either Mum or Sirius to sign off on letting me finally remove myself from that family."

"I won't sign off on it," Lily said firmly. "You and the Potters need to make peace with each other."

"The only peace I'm ever going to have with the eldest James Potter is the peace of the grave. At least Professor Potter has had the occasional moment of lucidity and treated me as a person rather than Death Eater spawn once or twice. His father, on the other hand, has been exactly the opposite of that, making sure that he was extremely obvious in his division of affection between the children. Let's rephrase that – he loves the children, but he wishes that he'd been able to kill the walking waste of sperm before it was born."

"Have you ever heard of forgiveness?" a familiar voice asked. It was the man in question, and he looked somewhere between abashed and angry.

"You might want to look the word up sometime, you bastard," Harry snarled at him. "I understand what it means, but you obviously never have gotten a grasp on it." He paused. "Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called you a bastard. After all, you're legitimate. I'm the bastard son of a Death Eater."

"No you're not," Lily said angrily.

"Give 'Gramps' here a few days, and he'll be tearing his hair out trying to figure out how the spell could give a false result, because if there's one thing I've learned about the Potter men, they are never wrong – just ask them. Thank Merlin that Sirius is managing to teach Jimmy that admitting you're wrong isn't a bad thing."

"I can't believe how angry you are," James Senior said.

"Hmm, could it be because an insane woman used my blood to return Voldemort to a body and then raped me for an hour?" He didn't exactly hear the gasp from his mother. "Could it be that I had to fight for my life? Or could it be the worst of all – that I've discovered that I'm related by blood to two of the most hard-headed and stiff-necked men on the planet? You've never tried to lower your voice around me, Mister Potter, so I know that you would have killed me and gotten rid of the body if you'd been able to figure out how." At everyone's startled gasps, Harry finished, "Didn't think I overheard that little titbit

when I was six, did you? You get me those forms, formally disinheriting me from the Potter family, and as soon as I can do it legally, you will be shut of me permanently."

James Senior was blinking in surprise, which angered Harry for some reason. "I was a damned baby, you moron! How in hell was it my fault *who* fathered me? Why was my mother at fault for being captured and attacked by Death Eaters? You have spent my entire life telling me that you want to be the one to kill me when I go dark, and now you're surprised that I'm pissed at you and want nothing to do with your worthless stinking family? You and your son shame the very name Potter, and shame the House of Godric Gryffindor by having been members."

This earned him an open-handed slap from the elder Potter, who turned and stalked from the room. "That was your free one, Mister Potter. Next one loses you body parts," Harry called after him.

"Did you have to antagonise him, Harry?" Albus asked.

"Yes," responded Harry. "Perhaps petty of me, but maybe now he'll get a feel for what he did to me for the past years. Expect more of the same when I see my biological father."

"They both crave forgiveness," the Headmaster said.

"Specifically, they both want me to forget that the past few years ever happened. Does James Potter – either of the adult ones – remember *why* Mum divorced my father? Big hint - his name is Harry. Neither James Potter could forgive Mum for letting herself be raped, so they took it out on me, the reminder of that awful time. Mum had no control over the situation, but they still treated her badly for being involved, and when she made peace with me, she proved that she really does love me. Father never has loved me, and never will. If we are extremely lucky, he might change enough to become a friend, but he will never be my dad. He lost that chance, and I hope that he and his father both have extremely long lives knowing that they could have avoided all this by simply admitting that I had nothing to do with the circumstances of my own birth." He looked at the wand and sword laying on the table next to him. "'Grandfather' even made some disparaging comment about my arrival from the Riddle graveyard, if I

heard him right! And now I'm supposed to roll over and forgive them? I don't fucking think so! They'll earn it, first!"

"Language, Harry," Lily scowled at him. He looked at the looks that both Lily and Dumbledore were giving him, and he sighed. He shut down his face, letting no emotion show.

"I apologise, Mum. I was angry." He looked to the Headmaster. "Is there anything else that is interesting, by chance? Something else I need to know about?"

"Two things, closely connected," Dumbledore said with a frown. "But I will not speak of them here. We will speak of them in my office, where I have a much greater control over who listens to what is said."

Madam Pomfrey bustled out to see Harry. "I see that you are feeling well," she said. "More precisely, I could hear that you are certainly feeling energetic enough. I will entrust you to the care of your mother, but you must return here if you feel weak or dizzy." He nodded firmly.

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The next day or two was difficult for Harry. The school didn't seem to know whether or not to come to him and welcome him back, or whether they should give him space. Even the Gryffindors seemed to be the same way, and he found Hermione very deep in thought every time he wanted to talk to her, a scowl on her face. Ginny seemed to be with Neville most of the time.

He finally got the Weasleys and Hermione together to tell them what had happened, and the looks of horror on the girls faces made him wish that he hadn't said anything. He was in the process of trying to soften the blow, as it were, when Professor McGonagall came to retrieve him. "The Headmaster wishes to speak with you, Mister Potter."

Far more gently than he had ever said it to anyone else, he said, "My name is Harry Black, Professor. I understand why you might think otherwise, but I use the last name of the only man ever to treat me as his son."

"I understand," she replied, "and I apologise. I simply thought that now that the truth of your parentage was known ..."

"He is my biological father, but he didn't raise me. He divorced Mum because I exist. He'll never be my Dad." She nodded sadly.

The walk to the Headmaster's office was quiet, with little in the way of conversation. They quickly made it to the gargoyle, and the Deputy Headmistress opened the moving stairway for him. In short order, he was standing outside the door to the man's office.

"Come in, Harry," came the voice, and Harry entered to see a somewhat sombre faced man. "Sherbet lemon?" he asked, but Harry shook his head. "I do not wish to hit you with this, as the younger people might say, but there is some information that I promised you. I was uncertain until I saw the ring and cup that you brought back."

"What's so special about those?"

"Well, the ring is the family ring of the Gaunt family, the last known descendants of Salazar Slytherin. Voldemort's mother was born a Gaunt. The cup that you brought was once Helga Hufflepuff's. It was stolen years ago. Both of them have been turned to extremely dark purposes – they house a part of Voldemort's soul. Actually, I should refer to that in the past tense – they have had their influence removed." Dumbledore shuddered for the first time that Harry could ever remember seeing. "I nearly lost my life fighting the ring." He brought it out to show Harry. The black stone was now cracked down the middle in the same shape as Harry's scar, oddly enough. "The cup put up no such fight." He paused. "The previous owner of the cup left no heirs when she died, so by rights of recovery, this artefact is yours, if you so wish."

"I'll decide later," replied a stunned Harry. "Is that what that diary was? A piece of Tom's soul?"

"In all likelihood, yes. In fact, I would place a rather large bet on that being the case." He fell silent for a moment. "There is another piece of information that I need to give you, Harry."

Albus Dumbledore stood. "There was a Prophecy made several years ago. It was made directly to me, so there is not a layer of uncertainty about the wording."

"Why do I have this disturbing feeling that it's about me?" Harry grumbled. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Professor – it's not your fault. You told me that you'd tell me what I needed to know when you were more sure of the information."

"I appreciate your understanding, Harry," the Headmaster said. "I wasn't entirely certain until you reported the return of Voldemort, and I saw those Horcruxes."

"Is that what they call those?" He suddenly sat up straighter. "Koschei the Deathless! I'll bet *that's* where the legend came from!"

"You do your mother proud, Harry," Dumbledore smiled. "We are uncertain, but all the evidence seems to point that way." He scowled, an unusual expression for the otherwise open and generally happy face. "I need to tell you the prophecy, however."

He pulled a silver thread of memory from his mind and placed it in the Pensieve and then tapped the edge. An image of Sybill Trelawney rose from the depths and began to speak. "*THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES ... BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES ... BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM ... THE ONE SHALL BE MARKED AS AN EQUAL ... THE BETRAYED SHALL REMAIN TRUE ... ONE MUST DIE BY THE HAND OF THE OTHER AND ONE WILL MAKE THE WORLD ANEW ... THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD APPROACHES ...*"

"Okay," Harry said softly. "That was fun. I can only assume that you see me as the one with the power, since you're showing me, rather than Neville, or Hermione, or someone else. Mum and Professor Potter defied him at least three times that I'm aware of. The damned scar ... sorry about the language ... the scar probably points at the marking." He frowned. "What's the betrayed comment mean, sir?"

"I believe that it refers to you as well, Harry. After all, especially after learning what you now have, how best would you define your feelings toward at least Professor Potter?"

Harry nodded. "Wonderful. So we have to fight, and one of us will kill the other, and from the sound of it, if I win, I take his place?"

"I do not believe that the 'make the world anew' is quite so literal. It is more likely that you will work to remove many of the injustices in the wizarding world, which would be making the world anew from many currently living wizards and witches points of view."

"I hope so. I really don't want to be put through all this crap for the sole purpose of replacing the idiot I'm fighting."

Dumbledore chuckled. "That statement alone lends credence to my belief that you are not likely to become the next dark lord." He sobered. "I wish that I had more to tell you. I will keep you apprised of my studies concerning the Horcruxes, and I will see what might be done to defeat Tom."

"I appreciate it, sir."

"One warning, Harry. Now that there is a blood connexion between you and Voldemort, you may be in for a very rough few years. I do not know that it will be easier for him to circumvent your Occlumency shields, but be aware that such is possible. And his anger at your escape will be monumental."

"Not to sound as if I don't understand, but big deal. He wants me dead, and he'll do it by any means necessary. We take what precautions we can." He reached toward the candy dish that had been proffered earlier. "I'm in a better condition to accept the candy now, sir. May I?"

The Headmaster looked as if Christmas had come again. "Be my guest, Harry!" he said, pushing the dish forward.

Harry smiled and took one, popping the sour candy into his mouth and sucking on it. "Thank you. I suppose that I should be returning to my House?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied. He looked at a clock and grabbed a piece of parchment and scribbled something down. "In case a teacher sees you and attempts to chastise you, give them this note." Harry nodded and made it back to Gryffindor Tower without incident.

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The remaining days until it was time to leave for the year passed the fastest that slow days can pass. Both Fleur and Cedric insisted that Harry take the Tri-Wizard Cup and the thousand-Galleon purse, but they never had a chance to get together privately and talk about what had happened, either during the Challenge or afterwards. Fleur and her family left abruptly the day after Harry's meeting with Dumbledore, and gave him no explanation as to their exit. Few words were passed between them, and Harry was left puzzled and hurt. Cedric was quite public in his support of Harry, even though he admitted that he had seen very little in the graveyard. (Victor Krum, Harry found out later, had been sent on a wild-goose chase by the goblins and never got over the humiliation, taking his meals on the Durmstrang ship until it was time for them to leave.)

Things were barely better with the rest of his friends. Ginny and Hermione were strangely distant from him, and Ron simply acted confused, not knowing whether anger or concern was the right response in any given situation. The rest of the castle seemed to take their cues from those surrounding Harry closest, so he was nearly cut off from companionship.

He spent the trip to King's Cross in relative silence, with everyone reading or talking nervously. Draco tried his usual attack, but a well-placed *Reducto* ensured that he would not be casting spells until he had managed to replace his wand.

The exit from the platform into Muggle London was one of the most sombre and unhappy ones Harry could remember in quite some time. He didn't even speak to the others when he saw Remus, simply allowing the man to gather his things together and get them quickly to the Leaky Cauldron. Sienna and James Junior travelled with their father to spend some time with him.

He settled quietly into his room in Hogsmeade and sighed heavily at what he had lost this year. *And next is not likely to shape up any better*, he thought.

Chapter 13

Harry had been home a week when Sienna came into his room. "Okay, brother dear, we are going to have a little talk."

"About what?" he asked.

"About why you've been a royal prick since the beginning of the month!" she barked back at him. "You haven't talked to Hermione or Ginny since that talk with Dumbledore. Stop sulking and talk to them!"

He stood and paced back and forth a few times, fuming. "Have you had this conversation with them as well?" he finally asked. "After all, they chose to stop talking to me as well. Unless you're trying to demand something of someone, conversation is usually a two way street." He paused. "In fact, the last conversation that we had that wasn't basic inanities was the night that I told everyone about what had happened to me. I haven't had a serious conversation with anyone not a teacher until this very moment."

She scowled. "That can't be right!" she exclaimed.

Harry went cold, and responded as such. There was no emotion anywhere in his demeanour or voice when he said, "Despite popular opinion amongst the Potter family, I do actually tell the truth occasionally."

She slapped him hard. "That was uncalled for, Harry, and you know it!"

His response was to spin her around and none too gently 'escort' her from his room, closing it and locking it once she was outside. She remained outside his door. "We are going to talk about what a crappy person you've been recently, Harry – don't think you can get out of it!"

"Oh, I'm quite certain I'll be brow-beaten into submission before the summer is out," he replied. "I can add it to the list of things I'll be forced to do."

Silence reigned outside his room for a long moment. He used this time to grab his Nimbus and leap out the window, ignoring the voice that he could hear talking through the door. *I need to get away from here for a while, damn it!*

He flew for a while around Hogsmeade, flying up to the school grounds and coming to a rest atop the cliff. It was a wonderful vantage point, since it would let him see for some distance, especially if someone were coming from Sirius's home in Hogsmeade.

"Damn it!" he yelled to the tree next to him. "Why is it always my fault if I don't forgive someone? Mum is screaming at me to forgive James Potter, even though he treated me like shit for fifteen years. Sienna is blaming me for Hermione and the rest not talking to me since June started. What will I get blamed for next? Voldemort coming back?"

"Possibly," came the voice of the Headmaster. Harry spun to face Albus Dumbledore, who looked sadly at him. "You were detected crossing the wards, so I came to see who had come to visit." He conjured a comfortable chair and sat. "My bones are just not up to sitting on the ground any longer."

"Sorry, Professor. I didn't think that the wards around the school ..."

"Stop, Harry. You are welcome here, and it gave me an excuse to leave my office. There is far too much paperwork, and I get so involved in it that I forget to get away and simply enjoy life sometimes."

"It's just ... maybe they are right. Maybe I am destined to be dark."

"Why? Because the Potter men are asking for, if not outright demanding, something that they have not yet earned? Forgiveness is not a currency to be handed out simply because someone has realised that they have done something wrong. The Potter men spent fifteen years treating you poorly, Harry. Do not feel that you need to forgive them as soon as they ask."

"Mum is angry with me now, though. She thinks that my father should be forgiven. She knew him far longer than I ever could – how do I tell her no?" Harry began to pace. "I think even Sirius wants me to forgive

him, but ... I can't do it, sir." He frowned. "You should be glad of the prophecy, sir. I made the comment when the whole Goblet affair happened, and I've never felt the desire as strongly as I do right now. If I didn't have to destroy Voldemort, I'd be really tempted to find a razor and just make the whole point moot."

Albus Dumbledore sat back heavily in his chair. "Please, Harry, don't let this cause you to make a horrible decision. There are those who would miss you. Despite what you might think, your parents would. I know that I would, and I'm certain that your friends would."

"I won't, sir. My life isn't my own. But I'd believe you more on my friends if they hadn't disappeared in horror as soon as I told them what had happened. Hermione and Ginny were gone like they'd been fired from a cannon. Ron is confused and doesn't know how to react."

"Many people do not know how to react when something such as this happens. Often they pull away from the individual, to 'allow them space' as it were, but the person in question sees it as being abandoned. Perhaps if you wrote to them and explained how you are feeling?"

"So I should guilt them into talking to me?" he asked with a scowl. He stood and began to pace, and surprised the Headmaster by suddenly turning and punching the tree. "Damn ... excuse me sir ... I'm just so angry, and I'm taking it out on you when you don't deserve it."

"I am resilient, Harry," he replied. "And you really should talk to *someone* about it. Besides, as you say, I am not the target of the anger, so I can listen as a caring and non-judgemental ear. As they say, rant away. And do not worry about the profanity, Harry. You have earned the leeway, and I think we all understand the healing properties of a well-timed curse word or six."

Harry laughed quietly for a moment. "Thank you, sir." His frown returned. "It's just that it's so overwhelming, you know? I have Voldemort hanging over my head, what his followers have done to me, finding out that James Potter really is my father and all the crap that comes with that, and being abandoned by my friends when I needed them most. I could probably have had any one of them hit me

without causing a problem, but when they all gang up on me? I'm feeling overwhelmed, and I'm angry because of that."

Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair. "Start with one of them and explain the problems with it to me. Maybe a solution will suggest itself, maybe it won't." He sat back and listened to his favourite student talk.

"Let's start with the Potter situation, then. My 'grandfather' spent the last fifteen years telling me that someday I'd end up like my father, wearing a Death Eater mask. That little bit I said in the hospital wing was real, by the way. I was there when someone was visiting, and I overheard him telling them that he'd have killed me and hidden the body if he'd been able to figure out how to pull it off. Did you notice that he didn't apologise or ask forgiveness? He walked in assuming that he deserved it. *Deserved* it! After all the crap he put me through?"

He sat down where he had been before. "And then of course there's my father. For years, I've been the worthless little drama queen, or king, or whatever the phrase is. He suddenly did some nice things for me this year, such as defending me before the Wizengamot, but that doesn't change the fact that he broke Mum's heart when he couldn't just live and let live. I was a baby, for God's sake, and he couldn't stand me! And now I'm supposed to roll over and forgive him? I want out of the damned Potter family, not to suddenly become part of it!"

"I don't imagine that anyone is insisting that you make up with your father after all that you have been subjected to."

"Actually sir, that's exactly what Mum is saying. She's actually been quite angry at me when I suggest that I would rather be legally removed from the Potter family, much as Grandfather wanted to do several years ago. All I want is the paperwork and for one of them to sign off on it as well, but they refuse. And it has to be either Mum or Dad that signs off on it. Hell, we had an argument about it just this morning."

Dumbledore frowned. "Has there been anything forthcoming as to why they refuse to sign the documents?"

"No, just a refusal. No explanations or anything of the sort."

“Oh dear. I think they are trying to avoid something, but it is causing other problems. I believe that I know why they are baulking at the moment, and I will admit that I accept their current reasoning. They should tell you, however. If they refuse to, I promise that I will tell you. But you should hear it from them first.”

“Something that explains why my father is an arseho ...” Harry stopped, blushing when he realised what he had been about to say.

“What did I say about therapeutic profanity?” the elder man said with a smile.

“So you really won't complain if I call James Potter an arsehole?” Harry said with an impudent grin.

“Especially since some of his actions do seem to point in that direction. I have often wondered about his unreasoning attitude toward you, since he so often could be the adult version of the student I so enjoyed seeing in these halls – except when you were the subject.”

“And I may have an explanation for it when Mum and Dad finish talking to me?” Dumbledore nodded. “Well, that's the Potters out of the way, for good or ill.” He sighed. “Everything else, though, is just too much. Voldemort, Bellatrix ...” he shuddered. “The worst thing about it is that I enjoyed it, sir!” he softly said. “No matter what else she is, she's ...” he blushed. “She's rather skilled in those talents.”

Dumbledore frowned. “Yes, well, there was a reason she was referred to as 'the girl most likely to' by the male students. We teachers *do* hear things. But you must also remember, Harry, that she was using magic on you. From what you described, I am certain that you had an Aphrodisia Charm and a modified Stamina Charm, which would explain the increased ... ah, shall we say – output – I was informed of by Madam Pomfrey.” At Harry's surprised look, he said, “Not as Headmaster, but as member of the Wizengamot. Investigatory only.”

Harry understood the shorthand that the Professor was using. “I just feel so ... unclean, sir. And then to have Fleur and her family disappear so fast, without even a word to me? Everyone I care for

seems to have backed off when I needed them most! Hermione and Ginny and everyone else!”

“I still think that you need to speak to them, Harry.”

“It's hard to, sir. Where were they when I woke up? Why did they avoid me? We've broken the rules when it was important before – *I'd* have broken them if any one of *them* was in the hospital wing.” He realised that it sounded as if he were whinging, and he supposed that he was.

Dumbledore frowned. “That is likely my fault, Harry. I could see that you had experienced something horrible, given that you reappeared naked and lost consciousness almost immediately. They had been by your side at the bed, but when I ... Harry, I must admit to you that I performed Legilimency on you while you were unconscious. I needed to know what had happened.”

“I understand sir. I'd likely have done the same in the same circumstances.”

“Thank you for forgiving an old man such a violation of your privacy. As I was saying, however, I felt it best that they not crowd you when you awoke, given what had happened. I fear that I was far too harsh in my insistence, from the sound of things. Some of the blame must fall on me.” He thought for a moment. “Yes. I believe that the phrase that most likely caused this was when I said something like 'If you love him, you will give him some space when he wakes up.'” He sighed sadly. “It is amazing what damage a well-intentioned phrase can do. My apologies, Harry. I believe that I am the cause for your lack of companionship at the end of the year.”

Harry stared at the Headmaster for a long moment. Part of him wanted to be angry – hell, furious! – at the man, but the rest of him saw the deep sorrow in the man's demeanour. He took a deep breath before saying, “Sir, I understand what you meant to do. If Fleur could forgive me for *intentionally* calling her a prostitute, then how can I not forgive you for something that was never meant to hurt? It bothers me, but I can't really get angry for it. It's in the past. I think you're right, though. I need to talk to them, and if I contact them, it makes it that much more obvious that I want them near me.” He frowned. “Is it

wrong of me to want to be a spoiled child for once and make them come to me first?"

"Wanting, no. To act on it might cause your relationships with them to suffer, however." Harry nodded.

"Well, sir, I suppose that it would be a good idea to go back home and take my punishment. I threw Sienna out of my room."

"Was that before or after she graced you with that hand print on your cheek?" Albus asked with a slight smile.

"The hand print was the cause for the forcible ejection. Nothing harmful, just forceful. She didn't really have a chance to resist."

"So Miss Potter has finally met the irresistible force and discovered that she is *not* an immovable object," Dumbledore laughed. "Her teachers will be glad to know this."

Harry chuckled as well and then stood again. "Well, I had best be getting home, sir. I have punishments to be given. Thank you for listening to my whinging – it helped to talk to someone about it."

"It is not whinging to complain about the way life seems sometimes, Harry. You are not the type to whinge. It is a testament to how frustrating things have been recently that you have come even close to such type of complaining." He stood as well, vanishing his chair. "My door will be open to you, should you desire to talk."

"I appreciate that, sir. I'll try to avoid taking advantage of it too often."

"As often as you need, dear boy," was the reply. Dumbledore clapped him gently on the shoulder. "You are becoming a fine young man – one I am proud to know. I do not see that changing any time soon."

"I'll try to live up to your image of me, sir," Harry replied seriously. With a respectful nod, he mounted his broom and flew away toward his home. He thought he heard "You have already surpassed it, Harry," from the Headmaster.

He landed outside the house and walked in the front door, placing his broom into the closet. He turned to face his mother, stepfather and sister. "Where were you?" Lily asked.

"Up at Hogwarts, on the cliff overlooking the lake and the town. I needed to think."

"About what?" Sienna asked with an edge in her voice. She was shushed with a scowl from Lily.

"Voldemort, Bellatrix, the Potter family, abandonment, things like that," he answered softly. "Ran into the Headmaster while I was there, and he allowed me to rant for a bit, including a little therapeutic profanity, to use his words."

"You swore at the Headmaster?" Lily asked, aghast. Sirius had his eyes wide and his fingers crossed, obviously awaiting Harry's answer.

"Only in the sense that he was in the area listening, and told me not to stop on his account. I was censoring anyway – I think only a couple slipped out. Learned some stuff while I was there, too." He met Sienna's eyes. "Apparently the Headmaster was the reason I was abandoned at the end of the year – he never meant for that advice of his to be taken that much to heart."

Sienna scowled for a moment, and then her eyes went wide. She turned and ran from the room, eyes already leaking tears. "What led to that?" Sirius asked.

"Apparently when they were trying to sneak into the hospital wing to see me, he told someone something along the lines of 'If you love him, give him some space', and they took it to mean that I should be left alone *outside* the hospital wing as well. I think he gave them the impression – correctly – that he had seen my memories of what had happened. The weight of his significant years likely gave them reason to believe that he meant more than in the hospital wing." He paused. "From what he thinks, it was a case of neither side verifying what was meant or understood."

"You still ran off, Harry," Lily said.

"I'm sorry for that, but at least I chose somewhere at least remotely safe."

"He's right, Lil," Sirius said.

"There's still the matter of ejecting your sister from your room the way that you did."

"I did not do so until she struck me," Harry said calmly. "She came in all fire and brimstone at me, and then when she said something that I took to be her calling me a liar, I called her on that. She hit me then. I did not frog march her out of the room until that point."

"Why didn't you stop when we called through the door for you?" Lily asked.

"Because I was already out the window, and just heard a voice that I assumed to be Sienna's. Since I'd just thrown her out ..." He shrugged, figuring that he didn't really need to finish the statement.

Lily scowled for a moment. "I'll be talking with Sienna about this. She was a bit selective in her description of what happened."

"In honesty, Mum, her reaction when she found out what the Headmaster had said tells me a lot. Be gentle with her. I think that she was trying to do the right thing by thinking she had to shock me out of a funk that I wasn't in – at least not the type she thought it was."

"Even so," Lily responded. "I understand, and there won't be any real punishment. Just ... next time, try to tell us where you're going, if you can. We got scared, especially now that Voldemort has returned."

"I understand, and I'm sorry." After a short pause he said, "I think I need to talk to Ron, Ginny and Hermione. May I be excused to send some owls to them?" Lily nodded with a small smile.

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It was early July before Harry had the chance to talk to any of his other friends. He'd started exchanging owls almost immediately after

the long talk with the Headmaster, and had worked out a lot of the problems, but Ginny and Hermione were still coming across a little distant in their letters. He hoped that getting together would work the last of that out.

The day finally came and everyone he'd invited showed up for a day by the swimming pool. Ron wore a pair of shorts that came to just above his knees, and both Ginny and Hermione wore demure one piece outfits. Harry was in his usual racing style trunks, and Sienna wore a bikini that reminded them all that she was no longer a little girl.

The pool had a small area in it set aside for gathering – a floating table top marked it nicely, and the charmed beach umbrella marked it as well. The group gathered in the spot, drinks in front of them on the table.

“Okay,” Harry started. “We need to clear the air. A number of misunderstandings appear to have cropped up, not the least of which involves the end of the school year.” He scowled. “I don't want anyone feeling guilty over this, if they can avoid it. You might well have taken something the Headmaster said more to heart than he meant it to be taken.”

“What do you mean?” Ginny asked.

“He told you not to pester me if you love me, or something like that, right?” They nodded. “He meant while I was in the hospital wing. He apparently put too much spin on it, though. You took it to mean until I talked to you, right?” They nodded at him. “Well, I wasn't going to talk to you until you talked to me, because ... well, the way you seemed to disappear, I thought that you didn't want to talk to me.”

They all looked horrified, except for Sienna, who had heard this before. She still looked unhappy, though. “We seem to love abandoning you, don't we mate?” Ron asked in a voice filled with self-loathing.

“No, you were doing what the Headmaster suggested. You did what you did out of love.” He sighed. “None of us did the right thing in this. Dumbledore wasn't precise in his meaning, you didn't question, and I didn't force the issue. We could have solved this a month ago if I

hadn't been walking around moping and moaning that no one loved me. If you guys had abandoned me then I wouldn't be sitting here with the group of you."

"I'm still sorry," Ron said. "I let people talk me out of coming to you to see if you were all right. I shouldn't have. I've abandoned you before, and I won't do it again."

"I might give you reason to, Ron," Harry said. "I might get really stupid in the days to come." He suddenly grinned like that author that they'd all seen, Gilderoy Lockhart, and said in an over-the-top sort of voice, "As difficult as it is to believe such a thing could happen."

That served its purpose admirably, being the catalyst for the water fight to start. They laughed and splashed around the pool for a good portion of the afternoon, finally calling it quits when they were all too tired to make more than a token splash any more. A good time was declared to have been had by all.

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This set the tone for the rest of July. Harry would visit the Burrow and help out with chores, using the excuse with Molly, "It's only fair, Mrs. Weasley. If I want them to be able to visit, then I should help them get their chores done. I get to spend more time with them that way." She usually acquiesced. Hermione visited fairly often, but seemed somewhat subdued.

August fifth was a day for surprises, none of them good. A hot, dry, beautiful looking Saturday, it had started off nicely. Hermione, Ginny, Ron and Neville had stayed over that Friday night in order to finally throw Harry the birthday party that circumstances had prevented on Monday. All the original Marauders were there as well. Harry found himself unsure how to deal with James Potter being there, but at least the feeling appeared to be mutual.

The party had just started when Professor Dumbledore arrived. He smiled at Harry and wished him a happy birthday once again (having wished him such on the 31st), but Harry could see something in the man's eyes. He moved carefully into the house to talk to the adults, and when they exited roughly thirty minutes later, they all seemed to

be forcing smiles onto their faces. Peter's emotions were closest to the surface.

Harry frowned. He knew himself and Hermione well enough to know that neither of them would allow a mystery of any sort to go unsolved if it were within their power to solve it. So, he walked over to the group of adults and asked, point blank, "What's wrong?"

"The Ministry," Dumbledore replied.

"Albus!" Lily exclaimed. "This is his belated birthday party! There's no need to go into this right now!"

"You have not seen your son at school enough then, Lily," the Headmaster replied with a slight smile. "Both he and Miss Granger have the bit in their teeth, as it were, and will be distracted for the entire day, and possibly beyond, if they do not solve this mystery."

"He's right, Mum. He shows up with a worried look on his face – well hidden, mind you – and goes to talk to you five. You all come out looking concerned, or in Uncle Peter's case, angry. Even Crabbe and Goyle could figure out that something is up."

She sighed. "Very well. Albus here tells me that four of us are out of jobs."

"Say what?!" Ginny shrieked. "They've fired you?"

Dumbledore spoke up. "Indeed. An educational decree has been written stating that, in order to prevent preferential treatment, no teacher is permitted to teach their own children. This affects only the Potters, of course. I have no proof of this, Harry, but I believe that the Minister is trying to find some way of retaliating against you for humiliating him this last year."

"Excuse me?" James said. "He sends Harry to Azkaban for twelve hours, and then Harry was supposed to willingly go, for a more permanent sentence? What, for the good of the wizarding world or something?"

"Given how Cornelius's mind works -"

“When it does,” Remus muttered darkly.

“- indeed, Remus – but yes, James, I believe that Cornelius sees it exactly that way. He also refuses to admit that Voldemort has returned. He feels that Harry is an attention seeking child with mental problems.” Albus Dumbledore's face was dark. He was angrier than any of them could ever remember seeing him.

“So who else got canned?” Harry asked. “I can see how they got rid of Mum and Dad and Professor Potter, but who else lost their job?” He either did not see or ignored the fleeting look of pain that cross James Potter's face.

“I did,” Remus said simply. “It was decided that since so many students simply never take the class, and since so many Muggleborns never return to the Muggle world, the Muggle Studies class was simply not needed. I think that they've just been looking for an excuse to get rid of the staff werewolf for a while. So they did it by erasing my class. No need for the class to be taught, ergo no need for the teacher. Plus, it freed up budget money that can be better spent giving his flunkies a raise.”

“Who are they replacing everyone else with?” Harry asked.

“I don't know who I'm being replaced by,” Lily said. “But unless they got Filius back, then the students will not be getting the best teaching that they could be.”

“I do know that they are replacing James with the Special Assistant to the Minister, Dolores Umbridge. I suspect that the two replacing Lily and Sirius will be Ministry loyalists – specifically, people loyal to Cornelius himself, as the future Professor Umbridge is.”

Lily and Sirius looked at each other, and then at James. All three of them nodded and then turned to Dumbledore. Sirius became the spokesman for them. “Given this new information, Lily, James and I have no choice but to withdraw Harry, Sienna and James from Hogwarts and teach them at home. I'm sorry, Albus.”

“I understand and am sorry to see them go, but I understand completely,” the Headmaster answered them.

"No." This simple word caused quite some surprise when spoken by Harry.

"Excuse me?" Lily said. "You want to stay at Hogwarts, knowing this?"

"I'm showing my 'stupid Gryffindor' side again, I suppose, but aren't we playing right into Fudge's hands if we do that? He's angry at me, so he's doing everything in his power to grab control of the school and make it yet another inefficient Ministry department. He wants revenge on me, for humiliating him by being justified in my actions. He managed to get Bagman fired, rather than go down himself. He would much have preferred it if I had just disappeared into Azkaban like a good little boy and disappeared, but Mr. Potter mounted a very clear and concise defence that freed me." He paused. "Have I ever thanked you for that, sir?" When James nodded sadly, Harry continued. "So now we have him taking over the school. What are they going to do to the rest of the students if I'm not there to harass?"

"I'm not sure I understand," Sirius said. "You know that you're going to be the target of every single Ministry teacher, potentially failing the entire year, if they're stupid enough to fail you even when you do the work properly, and you still want to stay?"

"Yes. We also know that at least one member of the Board of Governors is a Death Eater. His master wants me dead. I'd rather the Death Eaters focus on me as opposed to everyone else." He looked gently at his siblings. "I would recommend that Sienna and Jim be home schooled, however."

"Why?" James Junior asked indignantly. Sienna, on the other hand, looked at him for a moment before sniffing and throwing her arms around Harry. "I love you too, Harry," she said, muffled against his chest.

"Sienna understands, Jim. I'm the one that Fudge and company are after. If you two are at the school, I guarantee that you'll become a tool for them to abuse so that they can get this or that concession out of me. I want the two of you out of the school for the same reason that Mum and Dad and your father want you out of there. To keep you safe."

"He's your dad too," the younger James said angrily.

"Let's not go into this now. It's a side issue that has nothing to do with the issue at hand," Harry said quietly. "What we do have to hand is that I pretty much *need* to be there to keep the heat off the Weasleys and Hermione. From what I saw at the trial, I'm betting that Fudge is petty enough to go after you for daring to be my friends. If I'm there to take the heat, you'll still be hit by it, but it'll be more splash than anything else."

Dumbledore was looking at Harry with an odd look on his face. "I know that I have no right to be, Harry, but when I hear things such as your reasons for staying in Hogwarts, I find myself feeling quite proud of you." James nodded in agreement, and Lily was sniffing.

"We could force you," Sirius said, "but I think you'd take that as well as I did being forced to do things by my family. As much as I hate to agree, I think that you're right about staying at the school. If your mother and I agree about letting you stay, then I want your word that you'll contact us if it gets to be too much."

"If you agree to let me stay, then I will promise to contact you when the staff's treatment of me gets to be too much for me." Harry smiled at the gathered adults. "Just so I don't get chewed out for it later on in the year – you all are aware that no matter how well I do in my classes in reality, I'm going to be failing all my classes this year?"

"Harry," Hermione started to scold.

"I didn't say that I was going to be slacking off. I said that I'm going to be failed, even if I turn in perfect work. In fact, I predict that any teacher who tries to give me fair grades will be given a stern talking to, or fired outright." He looked at Peter knowingly.

"Then let 'em fire me," he growled. "Let Severus take all those classes back if they want to fire me for being honest. Make no mistake, I will keep a record of the proper grades, because this is going to blow up in Fudge's fat face."

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The young ones headed back to what was left of their small party after a while, leaving the adults to talk about what to do in the upcoming school year. Hermione finally cleared her throat and said, "I think we should have that conversation we needed to have at the end of the school year."

"Mmm, you're right," Harry said. "Something tells me I'm not going to like it, based on the looks both you and Ginny have on your faces." Both girls added abashed to their nervous description.

"You're probably right," Hermione finally said. "My part in the conversation is to say that I am cutting back on all romantic connections this year. It plays nicely into what you were saying about backing off to stay out of danger, but I've been contemplating it since May." She scowled. "I took a look at what I've been like these past four years, and I realised that I'm turning into a bimbo! I've been more worried about romance and sex than I have been about school work, and that's just not me!" She put her head down, and tears leaked from her eyes. "I just don't know who I am any more." She looked up at that point. "Until further notice, I am ending *all* romantic relationships. Nothing with Ron, you, Ginny, Parvati or anyone else. I need to know who I am before I can properly get involved with anyone again." She stood and began to pace. "We're reaching O.W.L. year, and I for one intend to pass with O's in all my subjects. I can't do that if I'm worrying about whether this dress makes me look fat, or if I'm worrying about whether or not someone is in the mood to snog tonight."

Harry felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach, but he kept it from his face. "It'll keep you further from their notice, too. If you aren't as obviously my friend, then you aren't as likely to attract attention. And with you deciding to back off romantically, most people are going to assume that we're fighting, which will help you that much more."

Harry paused. "I know how you'll probably think on this, but something just came to mind. If they decide that they want insiders to spy on me, and they approach you because we're fighting, feel free to work with them. That can give us an edge on knowing what they're thinking."

"I am not turning my back on you as a friend, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed with a cry. "I am not abandoning you!"

"Who said you were?" he asked with a wry smile. "But appearances can be everything, you know."

"Neither of us is going to give the slightest impression that we're going to stop being your friend, Harry," Ginny said. "I will literally die before I do that again, even by appearance, even if it means I get expelled! I've betrayed your trust before, I won't do it again."

Harry snorted. "I was being a stiff-necked bastard," he said. "I was annoyed that someone was trying to kill me by putting my name in the Goblet, and I took it out on Gryffindor. Real mature, huh?" He thought for a moment before adding with a grin, "At least I'm not a bastard any more. Still stiff-necked, but we can't have everything"

He turned to Ginny. "Given the look that you had when Hermione was talking, you have something similar to say, don't you?"

She nodded, suddenly looking very small. "Yes," she said quietly. "I'm not backing away from romance, but ... well, Neville and I are -" She stopped and bit her lower lip.

Harry grinned and spoke. "You and Neville are getting really close, and you want to explore whether or not there's something real there, right?" She nodded in response, a very small move, and she looked close to tears. He stood and walked over to her, pulling her up and into a hug. "Look, this is perfect timing, Ginny. I'm not going to be any fun to be around this year, what with what I think they're going to be doing. I'm not going to be dating anyone, especially since my last love affair ended so badly." Hermione sniffed. "Not you. Fleur. Up and left without an explanation, and no response to any of my owls. I guess I was just a school fling. She should be happy, though. She gets part ownership of the championship cup, and her name down as a winner." He scowled. "That's neither here nor there, though. Ginny, whether or not you believe me, I am happy for you. You and Neville spend as much time as you need deciding if you're a match made in Heaven, or if you'll just be damn good friends." He kissed her forehead and hugged her again. "Now let's get back to whatever we have left of the party. I'm not angry and I don't hate anyone."

Sienna walked over to him and hugged him after he released Ginny. "I need to talk to you later, and it should probably be today. It's about what happened in May." He nodded.

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When the party had ended and everyone had gone to clean up, James Potter came over to Harry with a small bundle. "I'm heard rumours about the woman that is replacing me. I'm giving you my teaching notes for all seven years. I expect that you're going to need to start your own group to get actual study in."

Harry looked startled, and James frowned, running his hand through in a gesture that Harry found eerily familiar. "Look, I've been an arse over these past fifteen years, and nothing will ever change that. I wish that I could get to know you as a son, but that's never going to happen. That being said, this is not an attempt to buy you off or anything, and I'll swear an oath to that effect, too. Damn it, I'm a good teacher, and I can't stand the idea of you students getting ineffective schooling! I understand why you insist on staying, and even agree with your reasoning. Just ..." he paused, and then tentatively put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "... just stay safe, okay? I want to see you around for the next fifty years to remind me what an arsehole I've been." He let go of Harry's shoulder and turned away.

"Sir?" Harry said, which made James turn around. "Thank you. These will be very handy, and I'll do my best by them, to return them in as good a condition as I can."

"Actually, those are copies. Your girlfriend Hermione is going to love you for that – you get to keep them" He paused. "Let me talk to Lily, and see if she's willing to do something similar with her notes." With that, he turned and headed into the house.

Harry chuckled and dropped the bundle in his room before putting on slightly warmer clothes and heading back outdoors. He sat down by one of the trees on the property, thinking a little bit about what they had learned earlier in the day.

As he sat, his sister came out to him in a summer weight sun dress that whispered as the fabric slid across her skin. "Harry?" she asked, tension and worry evident in her voice.

"What can I do for you, Brownie?" he asked with a grin.

"You know I hate that name," she said with a giggle.

"It makes you laugh, though."

She sobered quickly. "Harry, there is something of a problem. Remember that kiss I gave you before you went off on the third challenge?"

He thought back, nodding. "Harry, there is something wrong. I ... I'm your sister, Harry, but my body is telling me to ignore that, and I don't like that."

"Be precise in what you mean, Sienna," he said more seriously than just a few moments earlier.

"Were I not stronger willed, Harry, I'd be peeling this dress over my head and trying to convince you to take my virginity." She bit her lower lip. "As it is, even suggesting it has caused some ... interesting physical reactions in me."

He started to open his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. "It's incest, and it's wrong, I know. I'm fighting it, but I think I'd like to get to the bottom of what is causing my body to demand that I ... well, to be crude, demand that I fuck you right now." She backed away. "I'm going to leave before I let that little voice get louder," she said, "but I wanted you to understand if you wake up with me in your bed some morning, that I'd lost the battle with myself. Please be gentle with me." She turned and walked back to the house, and Harry found himself watching her walk. Perhaps it was the conversation, or perhaps the kiss from the end of May, but he was appreciating her more as a woman than he was as his sister.

Crap, I see what she means. She knows it's wrong, and yet ... what could be causing it? Did someone cast a spell on me? Do I have the

male equivalent of the Veela power? Well, that's just something else to study during the school year.

He stood himself and walked into the house after giving her about half an hour to calm herself down. The Quartet, plus Sienna, sat down and began to plan for the upcoming school year.

Chapter 14

Harry grumbled as he put his things on the train. "Prefect," he muttered. "Why? It had to have been a Dumbledore decision, because there's no way that the Ministry would let me be prefect if they had any say in it." He carried his trunk to the prefect's carriage and slipped his robes on, slipping the golden badge with the large 'P' on it, and sat down to wait for others to arrive.

Hermione was the first, looking worried. "Is it the school year, or me that's causing the problem?" Harry asked.

"The upcoming year. With the Ministry replacing so many teachers, I just don't know ... what is the quality of the teaching going to be like? Will we learn what we need to pass the O.W.L.s?"

"Sure we will," Harry replied. "We've got notes from at least three teachers, and we have a fourth at the school. I can't see McGonagall or Sprout being terribly willing to knuckle under, although if I know our Head of House, we may see her replaced before the year is out. Professor Sprout strikes me as the subversive type," he finished with a laugh.

"You're assuming that they aren't going to teach properly," Hermione replied, her lips in a thin disapproving line.

"Our Defence teacher is notably a Fudge crony, Hermione," he replied. "And they replaced a total of four teachers? At once? They're trying for a major change at the school, and they've gotten the Board of Governors to go along with it. This, on top of knowing that Lucius is back on the Board, and also knowing that Lucius Malfoy is still a Death Eater, does not fill me with a great deal of hope for the future at the school. It may well be my lot in life to leave soon and get training elsewhere."

"Oh, I hope not," she said. Slowly, the other prefects arrived, and Harry looked out the window to see the Weasleys just barely making it to the train, as usual. He shook his head, chuckling. The prefects received their instructions from the Head Boy and Girl, and were let

go for their rounds, Harry and Hermione carefully ignoring Draco and Pansy as they left.

As they finished their first rounds, finding nothing out of the ordinary, they resumed their conversation. "I don't want to," Harry said as they found the cabin with Ron, Ginny, Neville and a pretty blonde girl, reading a magazine. At least, it appeared as if she were reading, even though the magazine was upside down.

"Don't want to do what?" Ron asked as they entered the cabin.

"Harry needing to leave to get training somewhere else than Hogwarts," Hermione replied.

"When would this happen?" Ron asked, alarmed.

"Probably never," Harry answered, "but I need to be aware of the possibility. This is not going to be a good school year by any stretch of the imagination."

The group frowned in agreement. They bet amongst themselves how long it would take for Malfoy to come along, crowing about the changes. "He's stupid that way," Ginny said. "He'll give us more ammunition against the Ministry than the teachers will."

"You have to love a braggart, if only for that," Hermione said with a slight smile.

"It's all he really has, sadly enough," the blonde girl said. She looked up at each of them. "You're Hermione Granger," she said, staring disconcertingly at the female prefect. Her eyes slid to Harry. "And you're Harry Potter Evans Black," she added before looking down at her magazine again. Harry was astonished that she seemed to have no reaction to his scar.

Ginny giggled at Harry's reaction. "Harry, meet Luna Lovegood. They live in Ottery St. Catchpole as well." She cocked her head. "You know, I'm surprised that you two never met in all the times that you visited us over the years."

"Well, stranger things have happened," he replied. With a grin, he added, "Heck, I'm one of them!"

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They'd been travelling for about an hour when the door opened and a pretty red-headed woman stepped into the compartment. "Hi," she said in an American accent, "mind if I join you?"

He scanned the faces of the others before finally saying, "Sure, there's room." She smiled and entered the cabin. "Where in America are you from?"

"Sunnydale, California," she replied. "I'm Willow Rosenberg, by the way." Introductions were made all around, and her eyebrows rose when she heard Harry's name. "Ah, you and I will likely be working together for a while during this school year. Your headmaster contacted some friends of mine about something, and I was sent along as sort of an expeditionary probe. I'll help you figure out some of the situation, and see if there's a need for our services over here. I'll explain more when we have some privacy."

"You can explain around them," Harry said.

"Oh, I know that. It's just that the train is less than secure, and I'm not in a position to be able to ward our cabin from listening spells." A look of ineffable pain and sorrow shot across her face for only a moment, but it was enough to pique Harry's interest.

"So will you be teaching, or there on more of a consultant basis?" Hermione asked.

"Researcher, more than anything else," was Willow's response. "More than that I can't really say until we've gotten somewhere more secure."

"What sort of things can you tell us?" Harry asked. "Are you a freelance witch, or do you work for someone?"

The look of pain shot across her face again, and Harry knew that it wasn't physical – he'd accidentally reminded her of something she

didn't want to think about. Before he could say anything, she spoke up. "I guess I'd have to say that I'm a freelancer, with hopes of becoming an employee. A friend ... someone I know started a company that deals with unusual security concerns. This job from your Headmaster works for me quite well. I can check out a few things, see if there's a need for X-Tech over here in Great Britain, and help you figure out what you need to do."

That was the clincher. "Holy ... you've been brought over to help us out with -" He stopped himself. "I'll shut up now, because it's not safe."

Willow laughed. "Good thinking. So, since I'm probably going to be seeing the group of you around the school, tell me who you are. I've got your names, but who are you?" They spent some time bringing the redhead up to speed with what she was likely to expect at the school, including -

The door opened, displaying an particularly arrogant looking Draco Malfoy, flanked, as always, by his bodyguards. "So Potter, are you ready for the new school year?" he taunted.

"Probably more than you are, Malfoy," was the simple response.

"Not going to find it so easy without having Mummy and Daddy to go running to any more, are you?" sneered the blonde.

"No, I've always left that to you and your Death Eater father."

"He was under the Imperius!" Draco protested.

"Not in May, he wasn't. He stood there as bold as brass and swore undying loyalty to that snake faced little bastard and his favourite whore," Harry snarled. "Or have you forgotten that I was there? I've seen your precious little half-blooded master in person, and lived to tell the tale."

Draco seemed to flicker between pasty white and beetroot red as he parsed Harry's statements. Finally, he settled back to his normal colouration, a smirk appearing on his face. "No matter, Potter. Things have changed around the school this year, for the better. I think you'll

see that fairly soon. With any luck, we'll even get rid of the mudbloods." He leered at Hermione and looked her up and down. "Or perhaps keep them around for the only thing that they're good for."

Ron started to stand, face red, but Harry gripped his arm and said, "She's already been doing that, Malfoy. Their purpose *is* to prove that inbreeding leads to creatures like you and your bodyguards, right? You know, defectives?"

Malfoy whipped out his wand, causing Ron to take a deep breath and say, "Yup, that proves it. Pulling a wand on a fellow student in front of a teacher. Defective." Malfoy turned purple again, almost vibrating in impotent anger before turning on his heel and stalking off in what was supposed to be anger, Harry assumed.

"Was that righteous fury or mincing?" Willow asked with a small smile. Given that he'd just been thinking the same thing, Harry lost it and began to laugh uproariously.

"Thank you for not giving in to what he wanted," Hermione said to Ron. "I'm thinking that he was trying to get one of us to attack him."

"Since his father owns the Minister and the Board of Governors again, and they have hired Ministry shills for teachers," Harry said, "he was probably going to go running to whomever he needed to in order to report us. He might still try to, but with Miss Rosenberg here, he's probably going to hold off. By the time he discovers that she's not a teacher, it'll be too late to really do anything about this incident."

They continued making their rounds throughout the trip, and on their last rounds, Harry noted that quite a few people were pointing at him and scowling or looking at him in fear. It was only when he heard the words "*Daily Prophet*" mentioned in conjunction with his name that he realised what had happened, and got the story from Hermione.

"The *Prophet* has been running a series of articles about you, pointing out the worst things, and telling everyone that you're ..." she scowled for a moment before finishing with "... they say that you're an attention seeking liar, Harry. Voldemort isn't back, they say. You're only saying it to draw attention to yourself. There has actually been an ongoing suggestion that you be sent to the Long Term Care ward

at St. Mungos until you give up this delusion.” She looked as if she would do an Old Testament smiting-with-a-capital-S upon the body of the first person who dared suggest that to her face.

He snorted. “So what else is new? Eventually they'll find out the truth and then go on to say that they knew it all the time and that they never actually felt that way. I'm trying to decide whether or not to leave England altogether when this crap is done.”

“Please do,” Seamus Finnegan growled. “You-Know-Who is dead, and everyone knows that there's no magic that can bring the dead back. Anyone who says that he is back is nutters!”

Hermione looked about to explode, but Harry put his hand on her arm. “No, Hermione. Leave him be. The truth will come out some day, and he's going to come crawling to me hoping I'll forgive him. Problem is, he's going to remember that this conversation happened, and remember that this is the third time he's turned his back on me. The Americans have a saying - 'Three strikes and you're out.' He'll remember that when it's far too late.”

Seamus pointed his finger at Harry and pushed it right under his nose. “The day I come apologising to you for this is the day I get resorted into Slytherin! Not going to happen, Potter!”

Harry grabbed the finger and bent it backwards, driving Finnegan to the floor trying to keep it unbroken. “Maybe you belong there, Finnegan. Like everyone else, you forget that I'm a Black unless you want to insult me. By the way, even though you currently are a Gryffindor, don't think I won't take points from you. I really don't give a damn about House points this year. I've too many other worries.” He let go of the Irish boy's finger and walked away.

Seamus Finnegan scoffed as Harry walked away. “I'd stay away from him, Granger. He's just going to get you killed one of these days, haring off the way he does.”

The next moment he was sporting a large red mark on his cheek where Hermione slapped him. “I'm not afraid to remove points, Finnegan. And I hope you realise someday the friend you threw away

because you were too stupid to listen to anything but the *Daily Prophet*."

"Nice one, Hermione," Harry said softly as she rejoined him. "I think that the engineer heard that slap."

"We'll know if I achieved my goal if I get asked at Hogwarts what that sound was," she replied with a smile. They laughed together and walked away to finish their rounds.

He received something of a shock when they exited the train and approached the carriages. What he had long thought were driven by magic were in fact drawn by large black winged horses. A closer inspection made him realise their somewhat reptilian appearance – their faces reminded him disturbingly of dragons – and he found that their white eyes simply added to the overall feeling of unease. "What the bloody hell are those?" he asked.

Hermione and Ron caught up with him and looked at him askance. "What are you on about, mate? There's nothing in front of the carriages," Ron finally said.

"He's right," Hermione said. "There's nothing there."

"They're called thestrals," the airy voice of Luna Lovegood said from behind him. "I've seen them since my first day here."

"Well, that answers everything," Ron scoffed. "Loony Lovegood sees them, so they must exist, just like the other things she talks about."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, Ronald," Luna replied in her sing song voice before she disappeared into one of the carriages. Ron simply shook his head in confusion.

The school's Entrance Hall was as beautiful as it ever was on the first day of school, the torches flickering as the students walked by. They filed into the Great Hall and sat at their tables, and awaited the entrance of the Sorting Hat and first year students, since that also preceded the welcoming feast. Again, Harry noticed people putting their heads together to whisper as he passed; he gritted his teeth and tried to act as though he neither noticed nor cared. Ron, Hermione,

Neville and he found seats together about halfway down the table between Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor house ghost, and Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, the last two of whom gave Harry airy, overly-friendly greetings that made him quite sure they had stopped talking about him a split second before.

“A little warning, girls, if you were talking about the *Prophet* articles. As Seamus was told, the Americans say three strikes and you're out. Think very carefully about whether or not you trust the newspaper or someone you've known for four years now.”

“You've always been forgiving before, Harry,” Parvati said after a moment, biting her lower lip.

“I'm through with that. I've had too many shocks these past few months, and I have people demanding forgiveness of me for something else when they haven't earned it.” At their astonished looks, he said, “No one here at the school, to be honest. All I ask is that you think on it, all right?”

Parvati looked at him for a long moment before meeting Hermione's eyes. With a sad smile, Hermione nodded, and Harry suddenly found himself being kissed a bit more thoroughly than he would have expected in such a public arena. “That's my opinion, Harry Black,” she said conversationally in a voice louder than necessary. “I've known you these four years and you've not lied to me yet. If you and Cedric say he's back, then he's back. You're as delusional as I am Slytherin.”

Harry blinked for a moment before breaking into a wide grin. “Thank you, Parvati. That means more to me than I can possibly say.” Dropping his voice he said, “We'll need a meeting in the common room after the feast, though. A few decisions need to be made.” She nodded and began to slowly pass word down the table.

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at the head table, searching for Hagrid, but did not see him. Hermione, on the other hand, scowled and drew her eyebrows together. 'Who's that?' she said sharply, pointing towards the middle of the staff table.

Harry's eyes followed hers. They lit first upon Professor Dumbledore, sitting in his high-backed golden chair at the centre of the long staff table, wearing deep-purple robes scattered with silvery stars and a matching hat. Dumbledore's head was inclined towards the woman sitting next to him, who was talking into his ear. She looked, Harry thought, like somebody's maiden aunt: squat, with short, curly, mouse-brown hair in which she had placed a horrible pink Alice band that matched the fluffy pink cardigan she wore over her robes. "That's likely the Umbridge woman that the Headmaster was talking about. You'll note that his look of interest is plastered on." The others nodded.

Before anything else could be said, the doors opened and a group of scared looking first year students came into the Great Hall led by Professor McGonagall, who was carrying the customary stool and Sorting Hat.

The buzz of talk in the Great Hall faded away. The first years lined up in front of the staff table facing the rest of the students, and Professor McGonagall placed the stool carefully in front of them, then stood back. Their faces glowed palely in the candlelight, and a small boy right in the middle of the row looked as though he was trembling. Harry recalled, fleetingly, how he had felt when he had stood there, waiting for the unknown test that would determine to which house he belonged.

The whole school waited with bated breath. Then the rip near the hat's brim opened wide like a mouth and the Sorting Hat burst into song:

In times of old when I was new

And Hogwarts barely started

The founders of our noble school

Thought never to be parted:

| | | | | | |
|--------|------|-----|---------|----------|--------------|
| United | | by | a | common | goal, |
| They | | had | the | selfsame | yearning, |
| To | make | the | world's | best | magic school |

And pass along their learning.
 "Together we will build and teach!"
 The four good friends decided
 And never did they dream that they
 Might some day be divided,
 For were there such friends anywhere
 As Slytherin and Gryffindor?
 Unless it was the second pair
 Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?
 So how could it have gone so wrong?
 How could such friendships fail?
 Why, I was there and so can tell
 The whole sad, sorry tale.
 Said Slytherin, "We'll teach just those
 Whose ancestry is purest."
 Said Ravenclaw, "We'll teach those
 Intelligence is surest."
 Said Gryffindor, "We'll teach all those
 With brave deeds to their name,"
 Said Hufflepuff, "I'll teach the lot,
 And treat them just the same."
 These differences caused little strife
 When first they came to light,
 For each of the four founders had
 A house in which they might
 Take only those they wanted, so,
 For instance, Slytherin
 Took only pure-blood wizards
 Of great cunning, just like him,
 And only those of sharpest mind
 Were taught by Ravenclaw
 While the bravest and the boldest
 Went to daring Gryffindor.
 Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest,
 And taught them all she knew,
 Thus the houses and their founders
 Retained friendships firm and true.
 So Hogwarts worked in harmony
 For several happy years,
 But then discord crept among us

*Feeding on our faults and fears.
The houses that, like pillars four,
Had once held up our school,*

Now turned upon each other and,

Divided, sought to rule.

And for a while it seemed the school

Must meet an early end,

What with duelling and with fighting

And the clash of friend on friend

And at last there came a morning

When old Slytherin departed

And though the fighting then died out

He left us quite downhearted.

And never since the founders four

Were whittled down to three

Have the houses been united

As they once were meant to be.

And now the Sorting Hat is here

And you all know the score:

I sort you into houses

Because that is what I'm for,

But this year I'll go further,

*Listen closely to my song:
Though condemned I am to split you
Still I worry that it's wrong,
Though I must fulfil my duty
And must quarter every year
Still I wonder whether Sorting
May not bring the end I fear.
Oh, know the perils, read the signs,
The warning history shows,
For our Hogwarts is in danger
From external, deadly foes
And we must unite inside her
Or we'll crumble from within
I have told you, I have warned you...
Let the Sorting now begin.*

The Hat became motionless once more; applause broke out, though it was punctured, for the first time in Harry's memory, with muttering and whispers. All across the Great Hall students were exchanging remarks with their neighbours, and Harry, clapping along with everyone else, knew exactly what they were talking about.

"Branched out a bit this year, hasn't it?" asked Ron, his eyebrows raised.

"Too right it has," was Harry's reply. The Sorting Hat usually confined itself to describing the different qualities looked for by each of the four

Hogwarts houses and its own role in Sorting them. Harry could not remember it ever trying to give the school advice before.

The Sorting was quickly done, from “Abercrombie, Euan!” (“GRYFFINDOR!”) to “Zeller, Rose!” (“HUFFLEPUFF!”), and the feast was soon begun. Harry suspected that the Headmaster throwing his beard over his shoulder was the signal to the house elves, because it was at that moment that the tables groaned under the weight of the suddenly appearing food.

As he ate, Harry looked down the table, at the new Gryffindors, and was struck by one girl who certainly did not seem to believe the Daily Prophet. A bold-looking girl with large dark eyes, a prominent chin, and long black hair, she seemed to be trying to catch his eyes for something else. When she blushed furiously and began to giggle and whisper to her table-mates (the giggling was obvious even if he couldn't hear it), he leaned forward and caught his head in his hands, chuckling wryly.

“Waz wrng?” Ron asked around a mouthful of food.

“I appear to have an admirer amongst the first years,” he replied. “I think she has a crush on me.”

“Good taste in men,” Parvati, Hermione and Ginny all said in unison. They met each others eyes and then burst into peals of laughter, but Hermione stopped first, frowning.

“I'm sorry, Harry,” she began.

“Don't overdo it, Hermione,” he replied. “You're allowed to look, remember?” he said with a laugh. “I understand your reasons, and I support them. Besides, you know that habits can't be broken overnight.”

“I know, I just don't want to hurt you,” she said.

“You won't, unless you start to act on some of your comments and then back off, and I can't see you letting it get that far.” He noticed Parvati and Lavender's confused looks and said, “I imagine she'll

explain what she can in the dorms later tonight. It's not 'end-of-the-world' bad, so don't worry."

She looked less than convinced, but nodded and the meal continued as before. When all the students had finished eating and the noise level in the Hall was starting to creep upwards again, Dumbledore got to his feet once more. Talking ceased immediately as all turned to face the Headmaster. Harry was feeling pleasantly drowsy now. His four-poster bed was waiting somewhere above, wonderfully warm and soft, and he imagined that he could hear it calling to him.

"Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices," said Dumbledore. "First-years ought to know that the Forest in the grounds is out-of-bounds to students - and a few of our older students ought to know by now, too." Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged smirks, with Ginny giggling softly as well.

"Mr Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four-hundred-and-sixty-second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr Filch's office door."

"We have had some changes in staffing this year. Professor Hagrid will be returning later in the year, having needed to take a short sabbatical in order to take care of some private business. While he is gone, Professor Grubbly-Plank has returned to cover for him. Due to some unfortunate new laws enacted at the Ministry, we have been forced to bid a fond adieu to our Charms, Defence and History of Magic teachers, and we wish Professors Potter, Black and Evans all the best. In their places will be Professor Dolores Umbridge in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Professor Emma Lightlock in Charms, and Professor Hamilton Grandman in History of Magic." There was a round of polite but fairly unenthusiastic applause.

Dumbledore continued, "Tryouts for the house Quidditch teams will take place on the -"

He broke off, looking enquiringly at Professor Umbridge. As she was not much taller standing than sitting, there was a moment when

nobody understood why Dumbledore had stopped talking, but then Professor Umbridge cleared her throat, “Hem, *hem*,” and it became clear that she had got to her feet and was intending to make a speech.

Dumbledore only looked taken aback for a moment, then he sat down smartly and looked alertly at Professor Umbridge as though he desired nothing better than to listen to her talk. Other members of staff were not as adept at hiding their surprise. Professor Sprout's eyebrows had disappeared into her flyaway hair and Professor McGonagall's mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it. No new teacher had ever interrupted Dumbledore before. Many of the students were smirking; this woman obviously did not know how things were done at Hogwarts.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Professor Umbridge simpered, “for those kind words of welcome.”

Her voice was high-pitched, breathy and little-girlish and Harry felt a powerful rush of dislike that he could not explain to himself – all he knew was that he loathed everything about her, from her stupid voice to her fluffy pink cardigan. She gave another little throat-clearing cough and continued.

“Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say!” She smiled, revealing very pointed teeth. “And to see such happy little faces looking up at me!”

Harry glanced around. None of the faces he could see looked happy. On the contrary, they all looked rather taken-aback at being addressed as though they were five years old.

‘I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!’

Students exchanged looks at this; some of them were barely concealing grins.

‘I'll be her friend as long as I don't have to borrow that cardigan,’ Parvati whispered to Lavender, and both of them lapsed into silent giggles.

Professor Umbridge cleared her throat again ('hem, hem'), but when she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice. She sounded much more businesslike and now her words had a dull learned-by-heart sound to them.

The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down the generations lest we lose them for ever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching.'

Professor Umbridge paused here and made a little bow to her fellow staff members, none of whom bowed back to her. Professor McGonagall's dark eyebrows had contracted so that she looked positively hawk-like, and Harry distinctly saw her exchange a significant glance with Professor Sprout as Umbridge gave another little "*hem, hem*" and went on with her speech.

"Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress's sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation ..."

Harry found his attentiveness ebbing, as though his brain was slipping in and out of tune. The quiet that always filled the Hall when Dumbledore was speaking was breaking up as students put their heads together, whispering and giggling. Over on the Ravenclaw table Cho Chang was chatting animatedly with her friends. A few seats along from Cho, Luna Lovegood had got out *The Quibbler* again. Meanwhile, at the Hufflepuff table Ernie Macmillan was one of the few still staring at Professor Umbridge, but he was glassy-eyed and Harry was sure he was only pretending to listen in an attempt to live up to the new prefect's badge gleaming on his chest.

Professor Umbridge did not seem to notice the restlessness of her audience. Harry had the impression that a full-scale riot could have broken out under her nose and she would have ploughed on with her speech. The teachers, however, were still listening very attentively, and Hermione seemed to be drinking in every word Umbridge spoke, though, judging by her expression, they were not at all to her taste.

“... because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognised as errors of judgement. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited.”

She sat down. Dumbledore clapped. The staff followed his lead, though Harry noticed that several of them brought their hands together only once or twice before stopping. A few students joined in, but most had been taken unawares by the end of the speech, not having listened to more than a few words of it, and before they could start applauding properly, Dumbledore had stood up again.

“Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating,” he said, bowing to her. “Now, as I was saying, Quidditch tryouts will be held...”

“Yes, it certainly was illuminating,” said Hermione in a low voice.

“You're not telling me you enjoyed it?” Ron said quietly, turning a glazed face towards Hermione. “That was about the duller speech I've ever heard, and I grew up with Percy.”

“I said illuminating, not enjoyable,” said Hermione. “It explained a lot.”

“Did it?” said Harry in surprise. “Sounded like a load of waffle to me.”

“There was some important stuff hidden in the waffle,” said Hermione grimly.

“Was there?” said Ron blankly.

“How about: 'progress for progress's sake must be discouraged'? How about: 'pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited'?”

‘Well, what does that mean?’ said Ron impatiently.

“I’ll tell you what it means,” said Hermione through gritted teeth. “It means the Ministry has declared open warfare on the administration of Hogwarts.”

There was a great clattering and banging all around them; Dumbledore had obviously just dismissed the school, because everyone was standing up ready to leave the Hall. Hermione jumped up, looking flustered. “Oh dear, we need to deal with the first years! First years! First years!” she called out to the Gryffindor table. “Meet up at the door with Harry and myself!” She grabbed Harry’s arm and dragged him gently to the doors. He had a slight smile on his face. He had a sudden image of her on Platform 9 3/4 with a brood of children surrounding her, trying to keep them under control.

The first year students looked a little wary of Harry, and this bothered him more than a little bit. “Tell you what, guys,” he said to them. “When we get to Gryffindor Tower, after we tell you where you need to go and what the House rules are, I’ll let you ask me questions. How does that sound?” They nodded vigorously.

As they stepped from the room, Harry suddenly thought of something. “What happened to Miss Rosenberg? I haven’t seen her since the cabin on the Express. Hope she’s all right.”

“I’m sure that we’ll hear about her soon, Harry,” Hermione said. As they began to lead the first year students, all of whom still seemed slightly frightened of Harry, he could hear the whispers starting up again. He sighed and shook his head as they walked. He had been stupid not to expect this, he thought angrily as he walked through the upstairs corridors. Of course everyone was staring at him – he had emerged from the Triwizard Tournament not more than two months ago claiming to have seen Lord Voldemort return to power. There had not been time last term to explain himself before they’d all had to go home, even if he had felt up to giving the whole school a detailed account of the terrible events in that graveyard. Add onto that

Fudge's transparent attempt (to him, at least) to discredit himself and any of his supporters for the embarrassment that had resulted in Azkaban for Harry, and this was not going to be a good year.

They reached the doors and Harry suddenly realised that he hadn't heard the password. He looked at Hermione, whose eyes widened as she realised the same thing. Neville came jogging up. "Sorry about that, Harry. Overheard a little of the conversation at the table and realised how serious it was, so I made sure that I heard the password." He looked at the Fat Lady and proudly said "*Mimbulus Mimbletonia*."

"Of course, dear," the portrait said as she slid aside from the door.

The Gryffindor common room looked as welcoming as ever, a cosy circular tower room full of dilapidated squashy armchairs and rickety old tables. Harry and Hermione led the new students in. Once they were in and surrounding the two fifth year prefects, they were told about schedules, and where the dorm rooms were, and all the other things that the first years needed to know. Then it was time for questions. "All right, I promised what answers I can give," Harry said. "If I don't know, I'll tell you that. I won't lie to you."

They stood around for a long moment before the very first student to be sorted spoke up. "Why should we believe you when you say that You-Know-Who is back?"

Harry nodded approvingly. "Abercrombie, isn't it?" At the child's nod, he said, "Excellent first question. There's actually more than one question in it, and I'll try to answer them all. To take it literally, you should believe me because it's true. But that doesn't answer you. What your question really is probably is something like 'What proof do you have that what you say is true?' Would that be closer to what you were really hoping for in an answer?" Abercrombie nodded. "I can show you scars, but I could have gotten them anywhere. I could point you toward the French Minister's daughter -" he turned and looked at Hermione, "That sounds like an art film made by a New York City film-maker." He shook his head and turned back to the students. "Uh, yeah. Right. You could talk to the Fleur Delacour or Cedric Diggory, but they didn't witness his rebirth. They were gone before it all started.

Really, when it comes down to it, I have no proof that I can show you. I know that it happened, but I can't point to anything that will prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt to you."

There was silence for a long moment before a young girl with hair that would do a Weasley proud said, "I believe you. If you were lying, you'd have blustered or tried to make things up and told us a certainty. Instead, you admit that you can't prove it. That proves it to me, and I'll bet when I tell Mother and Father that they'll believe you as well."

Harry was startled. "Thank you Miss?"

"Johnson, Mister Potter," came the reply. "Maureen Johnson."

"Thank you, Miss Johnson. Who else has a question for me?"

A brown haired boy spoke up. "What really happened during the second challenge? My brother said that you blew the top off a mountain!"

"Not quite," answered Harry with a laugh. "I managed to prove certain Potions lessons. Mainly, never add an oxidiser to a flammable situation." At the confused looks (except from Miss Johnson, he noted), he said, "There was dust and fire in the area of the fight. Five Naga were trying to kill one of the competitors and her sister. Not stop, but kill. I couldn't let that happen, so I fought them, and a lot of dust was kicked up. I wanted to hit them with something very cold, if only to slow them down, so I made some liquid oxygen." He noticed Miss Johnson going white. "Precisely, Miss Johnson. Dust, and liquid oxygen created at the exact same moment that a fire ball came into existence. I still have no idea how the group of us survived the resulting explosion." He paused. "So let me tell you one thing – if Professor Pettigrew tells you not to mix something into something else because it will explode, listen to him. If it's safe, he may do it on purpose to show you what happens, but if he tells you flat out not to, then listen. I was luckier than I had a right to be when I made the mistake with the oxygen in the second task."

A blonde girl asked, "What does You-Know-Who really look like?"

Harry cheered inside – this girl believed him! “Ugly,” he answered. “He looks like a cross between a snake and a man, with the worst parts of both being visible. His skin, if you can call it that, is pasty white in colour, and covered in scales. He has no nose – please don’t ask me the old joke question – and his eyes are blood red. Just looking at him would likely give you nightmares. I saw him directly and I get nightmares about that night. And no, that is one thing that I will not answer. I will not describe what happened that night.” He shook himself. “Any other questions?”

The dark haired girl who had been making cow eyes at him spoke up. “Do you have a girlfriend?” she giggled.

Before he could say a word, four voices spoke up. “Yes!” they all said in unison as they walked up and flanked him, two per side. The young lady in question was now looking daggers at the four. He turned to look at the Quidditch Hotties, as they were called, who had been joined by Parvati.

“Well, the word has been spoken,” he said with a grin.

“That adds some proof for you, Mister Abercrombie,” Hermione said. “If Harry were truly as crazy and attention seeking as the Daily Prophet is always saying, can you really see one girl, let alone four, admitting to being his girlfriend?” Abercrombie looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding, and they somehow knew that his nod was an agreement with Hermione, not saying that the girls were crazy.

When no further questions were forthcoming, Hermione and the other prefects carefully sent the first year students off to bed. Harry sat down on the couch and waited for the others to congregate around him, as he knew they would.

“So Harry,” Angelina finally said, “why aren’t your folks here this year? For that matter, why are Jimmy and Sienna looking furious?”

“Because the Ministry has it in for me, to be honest. A law was enacted that only affects the three of us, as I can figure. It states that no teacher at Hogwarts may be related to a student in a close familial relationship, since this opens the door for abuse of power and

granting a student grades that they did not earn. Since the three of us are the only ones who had teachers related to us ...”

“You really expect me to believe that they did this just to get you, Potter?” Finnegan asked in his thick brogue.

“Let me make a bet with you, Finnegan,” he said simply. “I will be removed from the Quidditch team at some point, and I will get failing grades this year. This will be despite the fact that I will be doing the same level of work that I was doing in my previous years. That law affects only three people here at school this year, two of whom I'm wishing weren't here.”

“You need family with you,” James said fiercely. “You're family. That's it. Any of our friends who don't want to be with us any more aren't friends, and we're best knowing about that now.”

“Oh yeah, he's a Gryffindor,” Ginny murmured. Giggles ran through the crowd when they heard a female voice dreamily sigh the word, “Yeah.”

“Seriously, though,” Harry said finally. “You might want to think about how publicly you want to be behind me. The Ministry shills are goings to do everything that they can against me, and if that requires that they destroy the lives of my friends, they will.”

“And what makes you so important?” Finnegan asked, disbelief still evident.

“I didn't sit back like a good boy and stay in Azkaban like Fudge wanted me to. You remember that from last year, don't you?”

“It was twelve hours, Black!” exclaimed Finnegan. “Give me a break!”

“Twelve hours with Dementors right outside my cell, you git. You spend twelve hours with Dementors and walk out unscathed and I'll give you the right to comment. Until then, keep your mouth shut on things you know nothing of.”

He looked back at the assembled group. “Except for those who have already made their attitudes clear, I'll give everyone in Gryffindor a

free pass if you want to distance yourself this year. It's going to hit the fan, and they'll likely go after anyone who insists on publicly being my friend."

"What if they aren't out to get you?" Katie asked.

"I'd love to think that, but I have word that our Defence teacher is a Fudge crony, and I embarrassed him last year by not rolling over and deciding that his career was more important than staying out of Azkaban. I'll accept all the ridicule you want if it turns out I'm wrong, but I'm betting that I'm not."

The group slowly broke apart, heading to their rooms to think. This left behind Harry and a group of girls – Angelina, Alicia, Katie, Ginny, Hermione, Parvati and Sienna. "What's going on, romance-wise, guys?" Parvati asked. "Hermione didn't react the way I expected when the girlfriend thing came up."

Hermione frowned and explained her thoughts as she had explained them to Harry during the summer. She bit her lower lip as she looked directly in Parvati's eyes. "Please don't think it's you. I'm not going to be with *anyone* this year, Parvati. Not Harry, not Ron, not Ginny, and not you. Trust me, it's going to cause me a problem this school year." She blushed. "After all, I *room* with you."

Parvati looked at Hermione for a long period before finally smiling. "I understand. I can't say that it doesn't bother me a bit, but ... well, I could just as easily have been in Ravenclaw. Padma and I *are* identical, after all. Same interests and all that. I just intentionally play the boy crazy sister, not that she hasn't developed her own rumours about that sort of thing. It's amazing what people will say around you when they think that you're not intelligent enough to puzzle out their attempts at code." She paused. "What I'm trying to say is that if you and I are meant to be anything more than just some sort of fling, then it will happen that way. I'll wait around for you."

"You and Harry can console each other," Hermione said with a small laugh.

"But who will be there for you?" Angelina asked, taking the younger girl into her arms for a hug, which was gratefully accepted. "I

understand the need to find out who you are. Your friends do too.” Harry nodded and smiled at her, joining the hug.

=+=+=+=

The next morning at breakfast, it was announced that the first week of classes would be Ministry mandated tests to see where the students were in regards to what the Ministry felt that they should know. “And so it begins,” Harry murmured. “Any bets on how bad my test scores will be?”

“I really want you to be wrong,” Hermione said. “This could destroy any chances at gainful employment if they ruin you in your O.W.L. year.”

“Probably his thought,” Harry grumbled back.

Harry's day went fairly well, since the History of Magic teacher was mostly silent and then Potions and Ancient Runes were 'taught' by teachers he already knew. His problem arose when it came time for Defence Against the Dark Arts. When they entered the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom they found Professor Umbridge already seated at the teacher's desk, wearing the fluffy pink cardigan of the night before and the black velvet bow on top of her head. Harry was again reminded forcibly of a large fly perched unwisely on top of an even larger toad.

The class was quiet as it entered the room; Professor Umbridge was, as yet, an unknown quantity and nobody knew how strict a disciplinarian she was likely to be. “Well, good afternoon!” she said, when finally the whole class had sat down. A few people mumbled “Good afternoon,” in reply.

“Tut, tut,” said Professor Umbridge. “*That* won't do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply 'Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge'. One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!”

“Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,” they chanted back at her.

“There, now,” said Professor Umbridge sweetly. “That wasn't too difficult, was it? Wands away and quills out, please. We have a test to

take, and since your previous teacher is currently getting some much needed help from the Mind Healers at St. Mungos, we can't be sure of how good his teaching was." As she finished, her eyes flickered to Harry, and her face twisted maliciously for a moment.

He stared back at her, his own eyes flashing. The battle of wills was on. She handed out the test papers, and the students took quickly to them, filling them with explanations and such. Harry was done in short order, only moments behind Hermione. The smirk on her face as Harry turned in his test made him worry more than a little.

The double length class was half over when the last paper was turned in. "These will be graded and you will be made aware of the grades next class." She reached into her handbag and removed her own wand, which was unusually short. She tapped the blackboard and words appeared: '*Defence Against the Dark Arts: A Return to Basic Principles.*'

"Looking at the prior teaching," she said, "I can see that 'Professor' Potter did not seem to have followed any Ministry-approved curriculum, which has unfortunately resulted in your being far below the standard we would expect to see in your OWL year. You will be pleased to know, however, that this problem is now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centred, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please."

She rapped the blackboard again and the first message vanished and was replaced by '*Course Aims*'.

Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic.

Learning to recognise situations in which defensive magic can legally be used.

Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

For a couple of minutes the room was full of the sound of scratching quills on parchment. When everyone had copied down Professor Umbridge's three course aims she asked, "Has everybody got a copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

There was a dull murmur of assent throughout the class.

"I think we'll try that again," said Professor Umbridge. "When I ask you a question, I should like you to reply, 'Yes, Professor Umbridge', or 'No, Professor Umbridge'. So: has everyone got a copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

"Yes, Professor Umbridge," rang through the room.

"Good," said Professor Umbridge. "I should like you to turn to page five and read 'Chapter One, Basics for Beginners'. There will be no need to talk."

Professor Umbridge left the blackboard and settled herself in the chair behind the teacher's desk, observing them all closely with those pouchy toad's eyes. Harry turned to page five of his copy of *Defensive Magical Theory* and started to read.

A more boring read Harry had never seen. It was dry and explained everything in excruciating detail in the dustiest language that Harry had ever seen. He was quickly drawn from his attempts to actually read (having had his gaze glide across the same sentence five times without understanding it) by noticing that Hermione had yet to open her book. She sat with her hand resolutely in the air, and the professor sat resolutely looking elsewhere.

After several more minutes had passed, however, Harry was not the only one watching Hermione. The chapter they had been instructed to read was so tedious that more and more people were choosing to watch Hermione's mute attempt to catch Professor Umbridge's eye rather than struggle on with 'Basics for Beginners'.

When more than half the class were staring at Hermione rather than at their books, Professor Umbridge seemed to decide that she could ignore the situation no longer. "Did you want to ask something about the chapter, dear?" she asked Hermione, as though she had only just noticed her.

"Not about the chapter, no," said Hermione.

"Well, we're reading just now," said Professor Umbridge, showing her small pointed teeth. "If you have other queries we can deal with them at the end of class."

"I've a query about your course aims," said Hermione.

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows. "And your name is?"

"Hermione Granger," said Hermione.

"Well, Miss Granger, I think the course aims are perfectly clear if you read them through carefully," said Professor Umbridge in a voice of determined sweetness.

"Well, I don't," said Hermione bluntly. "There's nothing written up there about using defensive spells."

There was a short silence in which many members of the class turned their heads to frown at the three course aims still written on the blackboard.

"Using defensive spells?" Professor Umbridge repeated with a little laugh. "Why, I can't imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to use a defensive spell, Miss Granger. You surely aren't expecting to be attacked during class?"

"We're not going to use magic?" Ron exclaimed loudly.

"Students raise their hands when they wish to speak in my class, Mr-?"

"Weasley," said Ron, thrusting his hand into the air.

Professor Umbridge, smiling still more widely, turned her back on him. Harry and Hermione immediately raised their hands too. Professor Umbridge's pouchy eyes lingered on Harry for a moment before she addressed Hermione.

"Yes, Miss Granger? You wanted to ask something else?"

"Yes," said Hermione. "Surely the whole point of Defence Against the Dark Arts is to practise defensive spells?"

"Are you a Ministry-trained educational expert, Miss Granger?' asked Professor Umbridge, in her falsely sweet voice.

"No, but -"

"Well then, I'm afraid you are not qualified to decide what the 'whole point' of any class is. Wizards much older and cleverer than you have devised our new programme of study. You will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way -"

"What use is that?" scoffed Harry loudly. "If we're going to be attacked, it won't be in a -"

"Hand, Mr Potter!" sang Professor Umbridge. Harry thrust his fist in the air. Again, Professor Umbridge promptly turned away from him, but now several other people had their hands up, too.

"And your name is?" Professor Umbridge said to Dean.

"Dean Thomas."

"Well, Mr Thomas?"

"Well, it's like Harry said, isn't it?" said Dean. "If we're going to be attacked, it won't be risk free."

"I repeat," said Professor Umbridge, smiling in a very irritating fashion at Dean, "do you expect to be attacked during my classes?"

"No, but -"

Professor Umbridge talked over him. "I do not wish to criticise the way things have been run in this school," she said, an unconvincing smile stretching her wide mouth, "but you have been exposed to some very irresponsible wizards in this class, very irresponsible indeed - not to mention," she gave a nasty little laugh, "extremely dangerous half-breeds."

"Just who are you talking about," Dean asked angrily.

"*Hand*, Mr Thomas!" she barked in response to his question. "As I was saying – you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group and potentially lethal, by a man who verifiably has mental problems. You have been frightened into believing that you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day ""

"No we haven't," Hermione said, "we just -"

"Your hand is not up, Miss Granger!" Hermione put up her hand. Professor Umbridge turned away from her.

"Now, it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about. And your name is?" she added, staring at Parvati, whose hand had just shot up.

"Parvati Patil, and isn't there a practical bit in our Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL? Aren't we supposed to show that we can actually do the counter-curses and things?"

"As long as you have studied the theory hard enough, there is no reason why you should not be able to perform the spells under carefully controlled examination conditions," said Professor Umbridge dismissively.

"Without ever practising them beforehand?" said Parvati incredulously. "Are you telling us that the first time we'll get to do the spells will be during our exam?"

"I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough -"

"And what good's theory going to be in the real world?" said Harry loudly, his fist in the air again.

Professor Umbridge looked up. "This is school, Mr Potter, not the real world," she said softly.

"So we're not supposed to be prepared for what's waiting for us out there?"

"There is nothing waiting out there, Mr Potter."

"Oh, yeah?" said Harry. His temper, which seemed to have been bubbling just beneath the surface all day, was reaching boiling point.

"Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves?" enquired Professor Umbridge in a horribly honeyed voice.

"Hmm, let's think ..." said Harry in a mock thoughtful voice. "Maybe... *Lord Voldemort?*"

Seamus gasped; Lavender Brown uttered a little scream and Pansy Parkinson actually slipped sideways off her stool.

Professor Umbridge, however, did not flinch. She was staring at Harry with a grimly satisfied expression on her face. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr Potter." The classroom was silent and still. Everyone was staring at either Umbridge or Harry.

"Now, let me make a few things quite plain." Professor Umbridge stood up and leaned towards them, her stubby-fingered hands splayed on her desk. "You have been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead -"

"He wasn't dead," said Harry angrily, "but yeah, he's returned!"

"Mr-Potter-you-have-already-lost-your-house-ten-points-do-not-make-matters-worse-for-yourself," said Professor Umbridge in one breath without looking at him. "As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark wizard is at large once again. This is *a lie*."

"It is NOT a lie!" said Harry. "I saw him, I fought him!"

"Detention, Mr Potter!" said Professor Umbridge triumphantly. "Tomorrow evening. Five o'clock. My office. I repeat, this is *a lie*. The Ministry of Magic guarantee that you are not in danger from any Dark wizard. If you are still worried, by all means come and see me outside class hours. If someone is alarming you with fibs about reborn Dark

wizards, I would like to hear about it. I am here to help. I am your friend. And now, you will kindly continue your reading. Page five, 'Basics for Beginners'."

Professor Umbridge sat down behind her desk. Harry, however, stood up. Everyone was staring at him; Seamus looked half-scared, half-fascinated.

"Ever hear of a Pensieve, Professor Umbridge?" he asked coldly.

"Yes, I have," she answered sweetly, "and they prove nothing, since the insane can also use them. Something I'm certain that *your father* can tell you all about?" She looked at him with a sickly sweet smile that told him that she felt that she had won this round.

"True, and any idiot can work in politics," he riposted. "Just look at the Minister, who threw me in Azkaban for *his* mistake."

Professor Umbridge's face was quite blank. For a moment, Harry thought she was going to scream at him. Then she said, in her softest, most sweetly girlish voice, "Come here, Mr Potter, dear."

He kicked his chair aside, strode around Ron and Hermione and up to the teacher's desk. He could feel the rest of the class holding its breath. He felt so angry he did not care what happened next.

Professor Umbridge pulled a small roll of pink parchment out of her handbag, stretched it out on the desk, dipped her quill into a bottle of ink and started scribbling, hunched over so that Harry could not see what she was writing. Nobody spoke. After a minute or so she rolled up the parchment and tapped it with her wand; it sealed itself seamlessly so that he could not open it.

"Take this to Professor McGonagall, dear," said Professor Umbridge, holding out the note to him.

He took it from her without saying a word, turned on his heel and left the room, not even looking back at Ron and Hermione, slamming the classroom door shut behind him. He walked very fast along the corridor, the note to McGonagall clutched tight in his hand, and turning a corner walked slap into Peeves the poltergeist, a wide-

mouthed little man floating on his back in midair, juggling several inkwells.

"Why it's Potty Wee Potter!" cackled Peeves, allowing two of the inkwells to fall to the ground where they smashed and splattered the walls with ink; Harry jumped backwards out of the way with a snarl.

"Get out of here, Peeves."

"Oooh, Crackpotter's feeling cranky" crowed Peeves, pursuing Harry along the corridor, leering as he zoomed along above him. "What is it this time, my fine Potty friend? Hearing voices? Seeing visions? Speaking in -" Peeves blew a gigantic raspberry " - tongues?"

"I said, leave me ALONE!" Harry shouted, running down the nearest flight of stairs, but Peeves merely slid down the banister on his back beside him.

"Oh, most think he's barking, the potty wee lad, But some are more kindly and think he's just sad, But Peevesy knows better and says that he's mad -"

"SHUT UP!" Harry bellowed, aiming his wand at the poltergeist and firing off a spell. Peeves blew another raspberry at Harry and began to fly backwards away from him, but impacted hard with the wall. Harry walked over to the menace and said, "Courtesy of the Marauders, Peevesie. I can get rid of you, too. Don't give me a reason to want to."

"Are you through?" Professor McGonagall asked. "Return him to his previous state, if you will."

"Can't. It'll wear off, though. Let him float around as a solid for now."

"That was not a request, Mister Black. And what are you doing out of class early?"

"I've been sent to see you," said Harry stiffly

"Sent? What do you mean, sent?" she asked.

He held out the note from Professor Umbridge. Professor McGonagall took it from him, frowning, slit it open with a tap of her wand, stretched it out and began to read. Her eyes zoomed from side to side behind their square spectacles as she read what Umbridge had written, and with each line they became narrower.

"Come in here, Potter."

He followed her inside her study, the door closing automatically behind him. "Well?" said Professor McGonagall, rounding on him. "Is this true?"

"Is what true?" Harry asked, rather more aggressively than he had intended. "Professor?" he added, in an attempt to sound more polite.

"Is it true that you shouted at Professor Umbridge?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"You called her a liar?"

"Yes."

"You told her He Who Must Not Be Named is back?"

"Yes."

Professor McGonagall sat down behind her desk, watching Harry closely. Then she said, "Have a biscuit, Potter."

"Have – what?"

"Have a biscuit," she repeated impatiently, indicating a tartan tin lying on top of one of the piles of papers on her desk. "And sit down." There had been a previous occasion when Harry, expecting to be caned by Professor McGonagall, had instead been appointed by her to the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He sank into a chair opposite her and helped himself to a Ginger Newt, feeling just as confused and wrong-footed as he had done on that occasion. Professor McGonagall set down Professor Umbridge's note and looked very seriously at Harry. "Potter, you need to be careful."

Harry swallowed his mouthful of Ginger Newt and stared at her. Her tone of voice was not at all what he was used to; it was not brisk, crisp and stern; it was low and anxious and somehow much more human than usual. "Misbehaviour in Dolores Umbridge's class could cost you much more than house points and a detention."

"What do you -?"

"Potter, use your common sense," snapped Professor McGonagall, with an abrupt return to her usual manner. "You know where she comes from, you must know to whom she is reporting." The bell rang for the end of the lesson. Overhead and all around came the elephantine sounds of hundreds of students on the move. "It says here she's given you detention every evening this week, starting tomorrow," Professor McGonagall said, looking down at Umbridge's note again.

"Every evening this week!" Harry repeated, horrified. "But, Professor, couldn't you -?"

"No, I couldn't," said Professor McGonagall flatly.

"But -"

"She is your teacher and has every right to give you detention. You will go to her room at five o'clock tomorrow for the first one. Just remember: tread carefully around Dolores Umbridge."

"But I was telling the truth!" said Harry, outraged. "Voldemort is back, you know he is; Professor Dumbledore knows he is -"

"For heaven's sake, Potter!" said Professor McGonagall, straightening her glasses angrily, having winced horribly when he had used Voldemort's name, "Do you really think this is about truth or lies? It's about keeping your head down and your temper under control!" She stood up, nostrils wide and mouth very thin, and Harry stood up, too. "Have another biscuit," she said irritably, thrusting the tin at him.

"No, thanks," said Harry coldly.

"Don't take that tone with me, young man," she snapped, "or you will be in detention with me after she has finished with you."

His face shut down completely. "Understood," he said with no inflection. "Go to her detentions and keep silent."

"Precisely. You need to watch yourself around these Ministry people. If you give them the ammunition to use against you, what good are you doing anyone?" Harry simply nodded, and she let him out of her office.

=+=+=+=

Dinner was less than easy for Harry, because although the students were whispering about what had happened, they didn't seem to care whether or not he could actually hear them.

"- says he fought You Know Who -"

"Arrogant shite to say that, isn't he? Like *he* could beat a Dark Lord."

"Well, he is just as insane as his father," Malfoy replied to the whisperer, although his speech was in conversational tones.

The silence was immediate. "Well, you're just as crazy as yours," Harry responded without looking at the Slytherin. "Followed in Daddy's footsteps and taken the Dark Mark yet?"

"That will be fifty points from Gryffindor for insulting a fine man and friend to all wizards! Lucius Malfoy is no Death Eater!" Umbridge's voice screeched. She paused before adding, "Another week of detention with me, Mister Potter."

"Hear that, Potty?" Malfoy drawled across the Hall. "Despite your insane ramblings, the Ministry knows who the real friends of the wizarding world are."

The silence spread out for a long moment before a voice spoke up. "For publicly ridiculing a student and spreading unfounded rumours, Mister Malfoy, I dock Slytherin one hundred points and give you two weeks of detention with me." The students gasped. Professor

Pettigrew was known to be a quiet man, and often did not get involved with the feuds amongst the Houses, despite having been Gryffindor himself. "If you can find proof of Mister Black's supposed mental instability, then I shall make a formal apology and restore those points. However, it must be proof that would stand up in a court of law, not a schoolboy trick of getting him angry in front of witnesses."

"Professor Pettigrew," Severus Snape growled.

"Yes, Professor?" he asked. "Do you wish to add to Mister Malfoy's punishment? I assure you that I will be excruciatingly fair to him in detention – as fair as I was giving it to him."

"Nice thing is," Harry murmured to Hermione, "I don't have the second week of detention. She gave that week to Mister Potter, and there is no Mister ... oh, bugger."

He turned and stood. "Professor Umbridge. As any one of the teachers at this school will tell you, I do not answer to the name Potter, nor will I. I can only assume that you meant me when you assigned that extra detention, unless my brother James managed a detention with you."

"You are Harry Potter and you will answer to that name," she said in her saccharine sweet voice that held obvious menace.

"Begging the Professor's pardon, but you are incorrect. I was legally adopted by Sirius Black when he married my mother, and took his family name. I really *am* Harry Black."

"Be that as it may be, if I refer to you as Mister Potter, you will answer to it."

"Respectfully ma'am, no I won't. I have fought it my entire school career, and see no reason to begin answering to it now." He walked from the table and left the Great Hall before the dumbfounded teachers could say anything.

He was met in the hall by Willow Rosenberg, who came running up behind him. "Interesting teachers you have here," she said conversationally.

"It's an attempt to drive me crazy," he said. "They don't like me in our government, because I embarrassed our Minister of Magic." At her somewhat puzzled look, he explained. "I guess he's the equivalent of your President over in the U.S.. You might even have a magical President, for all I know. Maybe I'll find out first hand when this whole Voldemort problem is done."

"Is it really that bad?" she asked in a voice that he was used to by now – she was trying to make him see that this was likely just annoyance speaking.

He laughed sharply, but with some actual humour in it. "Tell you what, Miss Rosenberg. Let me explain my life here so far, and you decide. I'd prefer to do it with Ron and Hermione around, so that they can fill in the blanks and correct me when necessary."

Willow's eyebrows rose. "I look forward to hearing it. By the way, if we're going to be talking much during this school year, you'll need to get used to an odd little tendency I have that I've been working on of running on and on until I've finished what I was trying to say." She paused for a second and then gently smacked her forehead. "Like that," she finished with an embarrassed laugh.

"No problems," he replied. "I understood you completely."

"Maybe I *should* worry about your sanity if you understand me that quickly," she laughed in return.

He began to feel a bit annoyed at the comment, but saw in her body language that she was actually making fun of the other people who called him crazy. He calmed quickly, just in time for Hermione and Ron to join up with him.

"You're hired," Hermione said with a laugh. "I've never seen anyone calm Harry down so fast from a mad."

"I was watching her body language!" Harry said, mildly affronted, although a small amount of redness appeared to be filtering into his cheeks.

"Watch out for him, Miss Rosenberg," Ron said with a laugh. "He's a rogue, this one is!"

"From the way you blushed, I'll *bet* you were watching her body," Hermione said. "Language, I mean. Body language." She grinned slightly to let everyone know that she had said it right the first time, despite her 'protestations'.

"Doesn't that bother you? I understand that you're his girlfriend."

The three Hogwarts students winced. "Let's find somewhere to talk about this, and a few other things," Harry said.

"Let's head down to the quarters that your Headmaster set up for me." She led the way down to the living area, and Harry felt a little pang when he realised that she had been given the rooms that his mother had used when she was teaching at Hogwarts while still single.

When the door closed, the American girl turned and said, "Look, we're likely to be dealing with each other a bit, so I'm giving you permission, if I didn't before, to call me Willow. Miss Rosenberg makes me think I've done something wrong. So, tell me about your past."

"I suppose that you could say that it all began on Halloween of 1979," Harry said. "My mother was grabbed by the Death Eaters for a little party, you might say. What no one at the time knew was that she was already pregnant with me, so when she turned up pregnant later on, everyone assumed that I was Death Eater spawn. James Potter – my biological father, that is – at least has the excuse of the lingering effects of a curse on him to explain why he spent the last fifteen years being a thundering arsehole to me, excuse the language, please. His father simply wanted me dead because I was a Death Eater."

“They thought you were going to become a Death Eater because your supposed biological father was a Death Eater? How backward is that jerk?” Willow asked.

“I'm not getting into that,” Harry replied. “I spent until I was seven being shunned by both my mother and my father, but something made an impression on Mum, and she apologised for her treatment of me.” He paused, a pensive look on his face, then shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Mum and father divorced, and Sirius took us in. Oh, by the way, when I was fifteen months old, a dark wizard decided that I was a threat, due to a prophecy that I think he still wants to get his hands on, and came to our house while Mum was giving birth to Sienna.”

Ron interrupted. “Harry, did you actually just refer to an attempt on your own life by an extremely dark wizard as 'Oh, by the way'?” he asked incredulously.

“I'm here, so he obviously failed.”

Willow snorted, and then began to laugh, hard enough that she seemed in danger of passing out from lack of oxygen. When she had finally gotten herself under control, she explained. “You're definitely a Scooby,” she said. “You have your own Scooby Gang over here.” Wiping her eyes, she looked at their confused faces and explained further. “Okay, over in Sunnydale, we lived on a Hellmouth – a weak spot between the Hell dimension and here. Buffy Summers is a Slayer – she kills vampires and the occasional demon. Usually the Slayer is solitary, but she – well, Slayers were always raised to be solitary, but she didn't become one until she was a teenager. We all hunted with her – Buffy, me, Xander, and a few others. Somewhere along the line, Xander christened us the Scooby Gang, after the Scooby Doo cartoon. You just delivered a Xander perfect line, Harry.” Her face fell slightly. “At least, the Xander I knew ...” She shook her head. “Not your problem. Please continue.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, first year, Mum, Sirius, Remus and father were all hired here, Mum in Charms, Sirius in History of Magic, Remus in Muggle Studies and James Potter was the flying instructor. Evil

Defence teacher carrying Voldemort on the back of his head, danger, Philosopher's Stone, yadda-yadda-yadda. Second year -"

"Wait. 'Yadda-yadda-yadda'? is your only description? What happened?" Willow asked frantically.

"Faced Quirrell and Voldie, Voldie couldn't get the stone, Quirrell died after touching me, I passed out before Quirrell actually croaked, and I woke in the Hospital Wing. Second year involved that damnable diary of Riddle's – the one we're pretty sure was a Horcrux. Faced him, convinced the basilisk not to follow his orders any more, and killed the diary with this sword I wear."

"Yeah, you're the only armed student I see. Why is that?"

"I wear it because the sword came to me, basically. The Headmaster seems to think that Godric Gryffindor wants me to have it, since it *did* come to me. It's one case that I think the Ministry will have problems with, since it's effectively a heirloom." He shrugged. "Third year was easy, but last year was the kicker. We had a competition that had been cancelled years before because the death toll got too high. They scaled back the death dealing ability somewhat, but my name got entered somehow, despite the age line that was placed around the damned Goblet. Three challenges, and the last one was the worst for so many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that Voldemort has a physical body now."

Willow looked at him for a very long moment before saying, "I'm willing to talk to you about your experiences, if you want. I'm not a psychologist by any stretch of the imagination, but I am someone who has been through a lot of similar crap to you. I wish I could get Buffy over here to talk to you – she'd *really* be able to understand."

"I just might take you up on that," he said. Changing the subject fairly radically, he said, "So the Headmaster hired you to study the horcrux problem. What do you know about them?"

"Not a lot. Rupert Giles, sort of a mentor of ours, said that they sounded familiar, but that the research would have to be done over here. He couldn't come over just yet, but he thinks I should be able to find something. I'll be in and out of the castle over the span of at least

a year.” She looked surprised for a moment, and then grabbed her purse and pulled out a cellular phone.

“That won't work here,” Hermione said. “Hogwarts – well, magic in general – prevents them from working.”

Willow simply smiled and hit the power button. They were all surprised – all but Willow, that is – when it chirped. She quickly dialled a number and held the device to her ear. “Yes, may I speak with either Mister Harris or Miss Summers? This is Willow Rosenberg.”

Her demeanour changed, so it was obvious she was now listening to hold music, and then she sat up straight. “Yes. Thank you. Miss Summers? Willow. Very well. Dawn. I'm here in England, and I've made it to the school in question. I've made contact with both people I needed to speak to – one of them is here in my room, in fact – and I'm quickly coming to the realization that this is far beyond my expertise. I think you need to send a qualified team here to assess the situation. Please pass that along to Mister ... very well, Xander.” There was a long pause. “You might have, but I can't, Dawn. It's just that simple.” Another pause. “That may be, but that's not really the point. I think someone with far better knowledge of XTech's needs should come over here. I've got my research project that the need for XTech dovetails off. I'll be too busy with my research to really pay as much attention to XTech's needs. I'll drop you, Andrew and Xander an email before I go to bed tonight.” She laughed. “Yeah, it's about eight o'clock in the evening here, Dawn. Caught you just before lunch, right? Well, enjoy. I'll contact you later.”

She shut off the phone and looked at the three stunned students. “The type of magic you learn is not the only type in existence,” she said, “and in America, we ... they talk amongst each other. We've learned how to shield electronics from the damaging effects that your kind of magic does to them.” She grinned an almost evil grin. “Plus, we've found a way to use the ambient magic to recharge the batteries in my gadgets.”

Hermione's eyes were wide, and Harry snorted. “Well, we know what Hermione is doing this year – finding out how it's done.”

“Maybe Andrew will come over. I'm certain that he has some idea about what was done, since he's the one who configured this thing for me.” She patted the case next to her handbag, and happened to catch sight of the clock. “Well, I'd imagine that you need to get back to your rooms before they hit you with curfew violations. Given the way that the Umbridge woman sounded, she'd just love to hit you with further detention. Let me walk you back.” They nodded, and in short order were back at Gryffindor Tower. Their first day of classes was complete.

Chapter 15

The next day involved Double Charms and Double Transfiguration. Both teachers stressed heavily about the upcoming O.W.L.s. and then proceeded into the tests, and where possible, classwork. The same happened in Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology. Harry ran to get some dinner, since he had detention with Professor Umbridge at five o'clock.

He had barely reached the entrance of the Great Hall, however, when a loud and angry voice yelled, "Oi, Black!"

"What now?" he muttered wearily, turning to face Angelina Johnson, who looked as though she was in a towering temper.

"I'll tell you *what now*," she said, marching straight up to him and poking him hard in the chest with her finger. "How come you've landed yourself in detention for five o'clock on Friday?"

He swatted the finger away, hard. "I didn't exactly walk into the class planning on getting a detention for telling the truth!" he barked back at her.

"Well, we need you there, so you go lie to her, or something. Tell her you got drunk and portkeyed back naked after a few hours of debauchery or something. Just be at Friday's practice."

His eyes flashed, and she stepped back a half step. "If it's so damned important that I be at the practice this Friday, then go talk to her yourself!"

"Don't take that tone with me, Black, or else we'll be looking for another Seeker as well as a Keeper!"

It was at that moment that Ron, Hermione and Ginny came into the Great Hall for dinner. "Ginny!" he called out. She looked up, startled, and came over to Harry with a puzzled look on her face. "Do you have your own broom?" When she shook her head in the negative, he said, "Borrow mine. Turns out they'll be doing Seeker try-outs too this Friday." He glanced at his watch. "And thanks to our Quidditch

captain, I now will give myself indigestion from easting too fast.” He stalked to the table and began spearing various foods onto his plate. He glanced over and saw that the three who had just entered were talking vigorously with Angelina, and he could tell the exact moment that they had gotten through to her, because she went as white as was possible for someone of her skin tone.

The four of them approached, and Harry saw Angelina open her mouth, but cut her off. “Save it, Johnson. You're the second Gryffindor who has told me that the truth is unimportant; that I should just lie and make everyone happy. If that's what we're teaching our Gryffindors, then a change needs to be made.” He took a deep breath. “Let Ginny try out for the Seeker position, because I will not be on the team with you when I can expect this to happen again. You'll apologise now, and then something else will come up and you'll be Oliver again. I have too much other crap to worry about right now to worry about when I can expect you to explode at me again. I'm taking myself off the team.” He turned away from her and began to eat quickly. Ron and Hermione quickly joined him, but all too soon, he was forced to leave them.

At five to five Harry bade the other two goodbye and set off for Umbridge's office on the third floor. When he knocked on the door she called, “Come in,” in a sugary voice. He entered cautiously, looking around. The surfaces had all been draped in lacy covers and cloths. There were several vases full of dried flowers, each one residing on its own doily, and on one of the walls was a collection of ornamental plates, each decorated with a large technicolour kitten wearing a different bow around its neck. These were so foul that Harry stared at them, transfixed, until Professor Umbridge spoke again.

“Good evening, Mr Potter.”

Harry started and looked around. He had not noticed her at first because she was wearing a luridly flowered set of robes that blended only too well with the tablecloth on the desk behind her.

“Evening, Professor Umbridge,” Harry said stiffly. “My name is Harry Black, not Potter.”

"Your father is James Potter, is he not?" she asked.

"Biologically, yes."

"Then you are Harry Potter, and you *will* answer to it. Every time I call you by your name and you do not answer to it, that will be five points from Gryffindor. Do you understand me, Mister Potter?"

He glared at her. She smiled her nasty smile and said, "That's five points right there."

"Well, sit down," she said, pointing towards a small table draped in lace beside which she had drawn up a straight-backed chair. A piece of blank parchment lay on the table, apparently waiting for him.

"It is time for you to learn your lesson about telling those evil, nasty, attention seeking stories of yours. You Know Who is dead, and none of your stories will change that."

Harry felt the blood surge to his head and heard a thumping noise in his ears. So he told 'evil, nasty, attention-seeking stories', did he?

She was watching him with her head slightly to one side, still smiling widely, as though she knew exactly what he was thinking and was waiting to see whether he would start shouting again. With a massive effort, Harry looked away from her, dropped his schoolbag beside the straight-backed chair and sat down.

"There," said Umbridge sweetly, "we're getting better at controlling our temper already, aren't we? Now, you are going to be doing some lines for me, Mr Potter. No, not with *your* quill," she added, as Harry bent down to open his bag. "You're going to be using a rather special one of mine. Here you are."

She handed him a long, thin black quill with an unusually sharp point.

"I want you to write, *I must not tell lies*," she told him softly.

"How many times?" Harry asked, with a creditable imitation of politeness.

"Oh, as long as it takes for the message to *sink in*," said Umbridge sweetly. "Off you go."

She moved over to her desk, sat down and bent over a stack of parchment that looked like essays for marking. Harry raised the sharp black quill, then realised what was missing.

"You haven't given me any ink," he said.

"Oh, you won't need ink," said Professor Umbridge, with the merest suggestion of a laugh in her voice.

Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: *I must not tell lies*.

He let out a gasp of pain. The words had appeared on the parchment in what appeared to be shining red ink. At the same time, the words had appeared on the back of Harry's right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel - yet even as he stared at the shining cut, the skin healed over again, leaving the place where it had been slightly redder than before but quite smooth.

Harry looked round at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toadlike mouth stretched in a smile.

"Yes?"

"Nothing," said Harry quietly.

He looked back at the parchment, placed the quill on it once more, wrote *I must not tell lies*, and felt the searing pain on the back of his hand for a second time; once again, the words had been cut into his skin; once again, they healed over seconds later.

And on it went. Again and again Harry wrote the words on the parchment in what he soon came to realise was not ink, but his own blood. And, again and again, the words were cut into the back of his hand, healed, and reappeared the next time he set quill to parchment.

Darkness fell outside Umbridge's window. Harry did not ask when he would be allowed to stop. He did not even check his watch. He knew

she was watching him for signs of weakness and he was not going to show any, not even if he had to sit there all night, cutting open his own hand with this quill...

"Come here," she said, after what seemed hours.

He stood up. His hand was stinging painfully. When he looked down at it he saw that the cut had healed, but that the skin there was red raw.

"Hand," she said.

He extended it. She took it in her own. Harry repressed a shudder as she touched him with her thick, stubby fingers on which she wore a number of ugly old rings.

"Tut, tut, I don't seem to have made much of an impression yet," she said, smiling. "Well, we'll just have to try again tomorrow evening, won't we? You may go." Harry left her office without a word. The school was quite deserted; it was surely past midnight. He walked slowly up the corridor, then, when he had turned the corner and was sure she would not hear him, broke into a run.

This, of course, was when he ran into Professor Snape. "Running in the hallways, Potter? Ten points from Gryffindor and a detention with me on Saturday for being out after curfew.

"I was just getting out of a detention with Umbr ... Professor Umbridge!" he complained.

"You know that, and I know that, but you are still out after curfew, therefore the points and the detention stand." Snape gave him a nasty smile. "Now leave at a sedate pace before I decide to take more points."

Harry was fuming by the time that he entered the tower, and found himself glad that no one was waiting up for him. He stalked up to his bed and threw himself into it without working on any of the homework due that day. This, of course, did not ingratiate him with Professor McGonagall, since his Vanishing spell was no better than it had been

the day before. "If you can find the time within your schedule to study, Mister Potter, you would do much better in this class."

"Yes ma'am," he said with absolutely no inflection in his voice.

His second detention passed much the same way as the first, with his losing points for Gryffindor for not answering to the surname 'Potter' and writing further lines. His hand did not heal as well as it had the previous night, and once again, at midnight or thereabout, she released him. He did not run this time, and once again ran into Snape, who once again docked points and gave him detention.

He had a repeat performance on Thursday, although after two hours of lines with Umbridge, the wound no longer healed properly – drops of blood remained on his skin, oozing from the cuts. The pause in the pointed quill's scratching made Professor Umbridge look up.

"Ah," she said softly, moving around her desk to examine his hand herself. "Good. That ought to serve as a reminder to you, oughtn't it? You may leave for tonight."

"Do I still have to come back tomorrow?" said Harry picking up his schoolbag with his left hand rather than his smarting right one.

"Oh yes," said Professor Umbridge, smiling as widely as before. "Yes, I think we can etch the message a little deeper with another evening's work." He left the room as happy as was possible for him to be, given a bleeding hand and his anger at his treatment. He was at least going to be getting back before curfew was in effect.

He walked back to the dormitories and sat down on one of the couches and pulled out his books to begin his homework. He worked for a while before he noticed Angelina coming up to him. "Harry?" she asked softly, pain in her voice.

"Hmm?" he replied, looking up at her from his homework. "Can I help you?"

Her body language was that of a person in pain – not a physical pain, but psychic. "I'm sorry for being like I was the other day," she said. "I heard you say all those things, but apparently didn't listen. I cut loose

on you for something that was out of your control. I won't try to convince you back to the Quidditch team, because I deserve that after what I said to you." She paused. "Can I at least get you to call me Angelina again?"

He laughed softly. "I can do that, Angelina. I have to remember that it's harder for you guys to grasp what's going on here. I've had to deal with it all summer, and you guys learned about it Sunday night. What seems obvious to me is a shock to you guys." He paused. "Tell you what – I'll talk to Ginny. I did sort of promise her the use of the broom, so if she makes any noises about wanting to try out, then I'll stay backed out. Otherwise I'll stay on, if you'll have me."

She looked at him and bit her lower lip. "Good. I'm hoping you'll stay. We haven't had a chance to shower together yet," she said with a grin. "So I'm provisionally forgiven?"

"Depends," he said seriously. "I could use a kiss to make up for this week I've been having."

She smiled and pulled him to his feet, then wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips to his. He returned it with some interest, which grew when he felt her tongue tease at his lips. The kiss grew in intensity, stopping only when they had to break for air. He was amused to discover that his hand was resting rather securely on her bum. "Why Mister Black!" she said in mock surprise. "Do you have something on your mind?"

"Yes," he replied, "but I probably shouldn't even think about it down here in the common room."

"Care to come up to my room and talk about it?" she asked in a voice that left no doubts as to exactly what kind of talking she had in mind.

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Harry went to breakfast Friday morning with a smile on his face, even though the weather was sullen and quite wet, as it had been all week. He met Ron, Ginny and Hermione at the Gryffindor table, where they looked at him askance. "Where were you last night?" Ron asked. "Saw you down at the table in the common room, working on your

homework – nice bit with the Vanishing Charm, by the way – but then you never came upstairs.”

He was about to answer when Angelina came over and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you for forgiving me, Harry.”

“You're stressed. N.E.W.T.s for you this year plus captaining Quidditch for Gryffindor when the only example we've had is Oliver Wood, who I suspect is not the best example to have had.” He shrugged. “You'll do fine. You just need to relieve some stress occasionally.”

“You willing to do the same kind of stress relief that you did last night?” she purred. His answer was to blush furiously while she laughed and sat down near them.

“Well, that answered my question,” Ron said with a laugh. “How'd you get up there, though? Don't the stairs have an alarm?”

“Some of the girls know the way to shut off the alarm temporarily,” he replied after a mouthful of toast and jam had been swallowed. He met Ginny's and Hermione's eyes and saw amused approval of his phrasing.

“And you know it too?” Ron asked, somewhat indignantly, although he had a smile on his face.

“Did I say that?” Harry asked with an answering smile. “For that matter, I haven't actually admitted to even being up there. For all you know, we committed unspeakably erotic acts in the cupboard.”

“Are you telling our secrets again, Harry?” Alicia asked as she came up behind him.

He couldn't help but laugh. “Ladies, Ron, I can't begin to tell you how much you guys believing me means to me. This year is not going to go well, I'm sure, but knowing that I have people behind me helps a lot.” He reached out and took Hermione's and Angelina's hands. “Thank you.” They smiled back in response.

This was really the last pleasant thing that happened to him that day, because homework could never be considered pleasant, at least to him. Then, of course, there was the eventual detention with the blood-thirsty professor.

At five o'clock that evening he knocked on Professor Umbridge's office door for what he sincerely hoped would be the final time, and was told to enter. The blank parchment lay ready for him on the lace-covered table, the pointed black quill beside it.

'You know what to do, Mr Potter,' said Umbridge, smiling sweetly at him.

Harry picked up the quill and glanced through the window. If he just shifted his chair an inch or so to the right, on the pretext of shifting himself closer to the table, he could manage it. He now had a distant view of the Gryffindor Quidditch team soaring up and down the pitch, while half a dozen black figures stood at the foot of the three high goalposts, apparently awaiting their turn to Keep. It was impossible to tell which one was Ron at this distance.

I must not tell lies, Harry wrote. The cut in the back of his right hand opened and began to bleed afresh.

I must not tell lies. The cut dug deeper, stinging and smarting.

I must not tell lies. Blood trickled down his wrist.

He chanced another glance out of the window. Whoever was defending the goalposts now was doing a very poor job indeed. Katie Bell scored twice in the few seconds Harry dared to watch. Hoping very much that the Keeper wasn't Ron, he dropped his eyes back to the parchment shining with blood.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

He looked up whenever he thought he could risk it; when he could hear the scratching of Umbridge's quill or the opening of a desk drawer. The third person to try out was pretty good, the fourth was

terrible, the fifth dodged a Bludger exceptionally well but then fumbled an easy save. The sky was darkening, and Harry doubted he would be able to see the sixth and seventh people at all.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

The parchment was now dotted with drops of blood from the back of his hand, which was searing with pain. When he next looked up, night had fallen and the Quidditch pitch was no longer visible.

'Let's see if you've got the message yet, shall we?' said Umbridge's soft voice half an hour later. She moved towards him, stretching out her short ringed fingers for his arm. And then, as she took hold of him to examine the words now cut into his skin, pain seared, not across the back of his hand, but across the scar on his forehead. At the same time, he had a most peculiar sensation somewhere around his midriff. He wrenched his arm out of her grip and leapt to his feet, staring at her. She looked back at him, a smile stretching her wide, slack mouth. 'Yes, it hurts, doesn't it?' she said softly. "I think I've made a lasting impression upon you. You may go."

Harry headed back to Gryffindor tower only to run into Severus Snape again. "Out after curfew again, are we?" said the Potions Master with a wicked grin. "Well, you currently have detention with me tomorrow night and Sunday night, and we now shall extend that out to Monday night." He leaned in close. "Someday I will drive that arrogance out of you, even if it kills you." Harry knew that the man had not made an error in his wording.

"With luck, sir, it'll kill you first," he said without thinking.

Snape's hand shot out and struck Harry quite hard on his cheek. He hissed, "Someday, *Potter*, I will see you dead, and with luck, it will be at my hand."

"You'll never be that lucky, *sir*," he responded. "Now, if I might be permitted to leave so that I might get back to my dormitory?"

"Go, and be early to detention tomorrow." Snape dismissed Harry and turned sharply.

Harry made it back to the tower fairly quickly, and slipped inside to find a small party winding down. He found a butterbeer being pressed into his hand, so he dropped his bag near the couch and sat down. It was when he set his bottle down that Hermione gasped and gently grabbed his right hand. "Harry! Where did you get this?" Before he could answer, she gasped again and said, "You told us you were doing lines! Why didn't you say something?"

"To who? What could you guys do but worry? Dumbledore? Not with everything else going on. There's no one I could talk to about it."

"What about McGonagall?" she asked.

"She's the one who told me it's better to lie and hide than to stand up for what's right. She supports Umbridge's punishment."

"Have you shown her this?"

"No, nor will I. She's already told me that I should keep my head down and not make waves. I can't really see her suddenly getting offended over this."

"Why did you let Umbridge do this to you?" Hermione asked, aghast.

"What, fight it and maybe even win, but have her specifically target Sienna and James to get at me? You know she would. It's easier to deal with her doing that, and Snape giving me detentions for being out after curfew just because I was coming back from a detention -"

"What? You're a prefect! You're allowed to be out after curfew! You need to talk to Dumbledore about that!"

"What, so he can tell me that we need to 'let Severus do what is necessary to keep him in Voldemort's good graces', or some such crap? He'll uphold the damned detentions, because he can't afford to let Snape look soft. Look at that ultimatum that Madam Pomfrey gave him last year after the egg fiasco. They're *both* still working here, so I don't see Dumbledore correcting Snape's mistakes now. No, if I talk

to Dumbledore about it, he'll give me some reason why I should do the detentions. He a 'big picture' sort of guy, after all." He paused. "Besides, I have the feeling that they're going to find some way of stripping my prefect badge from me."

Hermione frowned, but nodded and cast some healing spells on Harry's hand. The cuts resisted healing – the best she could manage was to stop the bleeding. Harry changed the subject back to Umbridge. "I think that Umbridge is in league with Voldemort. When she grabbed my hand to make sure she'd scarred me enough, I felt pain burst through my scar."

Hermione listened closely. When Harry had finished, she said slowly "You're worried You-Know-Who's controlling her like he controlled Quirrell?"

"Well," said Harry, dropping his voice, "it's a possibility, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," said Hermione, though she sounded unconvinced. "But I don't think he can be *possessing* her the way he possessed Quirrell, I mean, he's properly alive again now, isn't he, he's got his own body, he wouldn't need to share someone else's. He could have her under the Imperius Curse, I suppose ... but why? That would mean that he gained control of the Ministry almost immediately after coming back – and why would he be doing a subtle take-over? Based on last time, that's not his style. Nothing in his defeat shows a need for subtlety, so it's not likely that he'd suddenly decide that subtlety was the route to take. No, I think that your scar can likely detect those with evil intent or great amounts of hatred in them."

He looked at her for a long moment as he considered her words. "I suppose that you're right, but I'm not completely discounting the possibility that she's a Death Eater in disguise."

"Nor should you," she replied. "But neither should you use that as your only hypothesis."

"I won't. It's actually easier to assume that the Ministry is just out to get me, to be honest. But you can understand why I thought about Voldemort when she grabbed my hand." Hermione nodded and motioned to him. "Budge over, Harry. I want to sit next to my friend for

a while, not be a nurse or an advisor.” As he moved, she said, “Oh, one last advisor-like comment. Keep a log of what each teacher does to you, Harry, and back date it for this week. You may someday be able to use it against them to prove that you were targeted. Describe better than 'Did lines', though, please,” she finished with a smile as she sat down next to him and gave him a one armed hug.

“I promise,” he said, returning the hug, and she put her head on his shoulder. They sat there in quiet companionship for quite a while.

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Harry was first to wake up in his dormitory next morning. He lay for a moment watching dust swirl in the ray of sunlight coming through the gap in his four-posters hangings, and savoured the thought that it was Saturday. The first week of term seemed to have dragged on for ever, like one gigantic History of Magic lesson.

Judging by the sleepy silence and the freshly minted look of that beam of sunlight, it was just after daybreak. He pulled open the curtains around his bed, got up and started to dress. The only sound apart from the distant twittering of birds was the slow, deep breathing of his fellow Gryffindors. He headed out of the dormitory for the common room after grabbing some parchment and his writing kit for a letter to his folks.

Making straight for his favourite squashy old armchair beside the now extinct fire, Harry settled himself down comfortably and unrolled his parchment while looking around the room. The detritus of crumpled-up bits of parchment, old Gobstones, empty ingredient jars and sweet wrappers that usually covered the common room at the end of each day was gone. He set his things down and began to write.

Mum and Dad,

Things have been interesting, and I've already gotten detentions from Umbridge for lying about Voldemort's return, and from Snape for being out after curfew when returning from detention with Umbridge. I've not talked to McGonagall or Dumbledore about it because of the situations this year. Don't intend to talk to them either, mainly because of the situation here at the school with the Ministry.

I've lost respect for our Transfiguration teacher for a reason that I'll explain when I can see you in Hogsmeade. I don't see that situation changing any time soon either. (And it's not even the fact that she called me Potter – she had just read Umbridge's note as to why I'd been thrown out of that specific class period, so the name was likely top on her mind. She's been good about my real name.)

Please don't take what follows wrong. I love you both dearly, and I understand the arguments that they used to convince you to let them come, but this year would have been a lot easier to deal with had you kept Sienna and Jimmy out of the school for a year. Some of the things I likely would have said or done are simply unavailable now, because those two can be used as hostages of a sort against my behaviour, and I dread when the Ministry teachers realise that.

Charms and History are what you'd expect – exactly what the Ministry wants us to learn, and nothing more. Defence is worse – there will be absolutely no practising of spells during the year. Umbridge feels that reading the book will give us more than enough knowledge of the spells to be able to cast them when the O.W.L.s come along. Please tell Father that those notes are going to be very handy this year.

Knowledge of James Potter's lingering curse damage is apparently widespread, because Umbridge continues to harp on it in her attempts to get me angry. Discovering that abusing him won't anger me is probably going to anger her in the long run.

Met an interesting woman on the train. Apparently the Headmaster hired her to check up of that project we were talking about at the end of the last school year. She's as pretty as you are, Mum. Her name is Willow Rosenberg.

I love you guys, and look forward to seeing you in Hogsmeade, assuming they haven't found a reason to keep me here in the school.

Sorry for making this such a whine-y letter, but if I didn't tell you some of this stuff, you'd get angry with me when we do see each other.

With love,

Harry

By the time that he finished the letter, he could hear distant sounds of movement from the dormitories above. Sealing the parchment carefully, he climbed through the portrait hole and headed off for the Owlery.

"I would *not* go that way if I were you," said Nearly Headless Nick, drifting disconcertingly through a wall just ahead of Harry as he walked down the passage. "Peeves is planning an 'amusing' joke on the next person to pass the bust of Paracelsus halfway down the corridor."

"Does it involve Paracelsus falling on top of the person's head?" asked Harry.

"Funnily enough, it *does*," said Nearly Headless Nick in a bored voice. "Subtlety has never been Peeves's strong point. I'm off to try and find the Bloody Baron. He might be able to put a stop to it. I shall see you, Harry."

"Yeah, bye," said Harry and instead of turning right, he turned left, taking a longer but safer route up to the Owlery. His spirits rose as he walked past window after window showing brilliantly blue sky – he had training later, he would be back on the Quidditch pitch at last.

Back in the Great Hall at breakfast, after sending Hedwig on her way, his face fell when his eyes landed on the Potions professor. *So much for Quidditch any time soon*, he thought. *Snape will keep me in detention for as long as he can*. He snorted. *Watch him give me a detention for being out after curfew after my detention with him*.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Ron asked when he saw his face.

"Just realising that I'm going to be in detention with Professor Snape for the rest of the school year. After all, I'm getting curfew violation detentions from him when he knows that I'm coming back from a detention. This also means that I'll get my prefect badge stripped from me because I will be unable to perform my proper prefect duties."

"Why borrow trouble, Harry?" Hermione said. "I still think that you should talk to the Headmaster or Professor McGonagall, however."

"Talk to me about what?" the Transfiguration teacher said as she happened to walk by.

"Nothing important," Harry said in a voice suddenly devoid of emotion.

"Nothing important?" Hermione asked indignantly. "You've got Professor Snape giving you curfew violation detentions for being in the halls immediately after a detention is finished. How is that fair?"

"Life is anything but fair, Hermione," Harry said forcefully. "If life were fair, I would have been accepted as a Potter from the moment I was born, rather than be given a name that specifically points out that I am not considered the first son. *My* name should have been James Harold Potter, not my brother. I love Jimmy dearly, but he's a reminder that I am not a Potter and never will be. If life were fair, Voldemort never would have risen to power and tried to kill me."

"Did we not learn our lesson, Mister *Potter*?" came the sickly sweet voice of Dolores Umbridge from the head table.

"I'm talking about when I was fifteen months old, ma'am. Verifiable history of Voldemort's attack on me. Nothing to do with current events."

She narrowed her eyes. "Very well, then." She went back to her food.

"Besides, if I make a stink about Snape ..."

"*Professor* Snape, Mister Black," McGonagall said.

He nodded. "... *Professor* Snape giving me unfair detentions, that draws attention to me from parties it is better to have not notice me. So I will deal with the detentions and realise that I will be turning in my prefect badge soon, since I will rapidly be hitting the threshold."

"And why would that be?" McGonagall asked.

"Because I fully expect that Professor Snape will give me curfew violation detentions for being out in the halls after curfew when I leave my detentions with him."

McGonagall was scowling. "Are you sure you don't want these detentions vacated?"

"I'd love to have them vacated, but then that will draw attention to me from parties we'd all rather not have notice me. Keeping the head down and the nose clean, no matter what, so to speak."

The Deputy Headmistress's scowl deepened. "Let me be the judge on that, Mister Black," she said as she took her leave and continued to trek to the head table. He was amused to see her begin a spirited conversation with Dumbledore almost immediately.

"Well, I've done enough damage here today," he said with a small chuckle.

"How do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"She's going to be wondering for a while about my words. I'm basically making her think about what she told me. Could be later today, or it could be never that she'll realise the damage a few ill chosen words can cause." He shrugged. "I'll never completely trust her advice again." He stood and headed from the Great Hall, Hermione behind him a few moments later.

"Thank you for being there as a friend last night, Harry. I didn't realise until later how romantic that could have been seen as, and I know that ..."

He held up his finger to shush her. "You're over-thinking things. You were there, you wanted a friend, that was what you got. You've sworn off romance for the time being until you figure out where you're coming from, and I'm good with that. Why not talk with Willow? She's what, six years older than you? Maybe she's got some suggestions that can help you figure things out better."

"Not likely," said Willow as she came up from behind them. "I *am* only twenty-two, after all, and I've made my own share of stupid mistakes. If you can learn one thing from me without having to learn it the hard way, it's that you should never fall back on magic as the answer for everything. That attitude gets addicting, and leads to a lot of other problems." The look of anguish flickered across her face fast enough

that Harry wasn't even sure that he saw it. Hermione, on the other hand, began to get a look of interest on her face and was starting to develop that certain look she got when a crusade, no matter how big or small, was about to begin.

"Well, if you ladies would like to get to know each other better, you could always do that as you watch us practice. I've got a Quidditch practice to get to."

"I like that idea," Willow said. "I heard some of the wizards in America talking about Quodpot, but I don't think I'd be interested in a game where the balls explode."

"You're in luck then," Hermione said. "This is a game where they fly around like maniacs trying to avoid getting smashed with charmed iron balls while trying to get a leather ball through one of the other team's three hoops. In the meantime, this maniac is trying to fly around at a hundred and fifty miles per hour trying to catch a flying golden golf ball using moves that are guaranteed to make sure that any of his non-Quidditch playing friends are going to have gone completely grey-haired by the time they're twenty in fear of him embedding himself six feet underground due to a high speed impact with the turf. And the game doesn't end until that maniac, or his counterpart on the opposing team, catches that golf ball."

"Surprisingly accurate, if somewhat biased, view of the game," Harry laughed. Harry retrieved his broom from Gryffindor Tower and headed down to Quidditch practice with the two ladies keeping him company.

The practice was what Harry expected from a team that hadn't practised together for over a year – they were good, but they had room for improvement. Draco and Pansy were in the stands to ridicule them, but Hermione was having some fun cast small jinxes and curses toward them. Draco quickly became silent when Hermione surreptitiously cast her Helium Hex on him. Taunting someone when your voice is high and squeaky is not conducive to proper ridicule of your opponent. The two Slytherins slithered off shortly thereafter.

As the practice ended, Harry noted that there were several adults at ground level, and he shook his head. "Wonderful," he murmured as he lowered to land before the assembly. "Mum, Dad, what brings you here, as if I didn't know? Can I assume that it's the same reason that the Headmaster and Professors Snape and McGonagall are here?"

"Somehow, you have still managed to go whining to your parents to dig you from a grave you rightfully dug yourself."

"Severus," Albus replied, "you know as well as I do that your detentions were unfair and abusive in nature. Your vindictive and hateful nature tend to make me less than willing to overlook some of your more ... exuberant punishments. Were it not for your effectiveness elsewhere, I would release you."

"Problem is, sir," Harry said to the Headmaster, "he's going to find the slightest thing he can to hit me with a far worse detention now. It will be within the rules. The only reason that I mentioned it at all in my letter to my folks – which I would have written anyway, no matter the news – is that I didn't want to have them find out from a different source, such as my siblings. Professor McGonagall only found out because she happened to be too close when I made a comment to someone who already knew about it. I actually had no intention of trying to get out of my detention. Ask the Professor," he finished, pointing at his Head of House.

"It's quite true, Severus," she said simply. "He did not wish to draw the attention of the Ministry too deeply, since they have taken notice of him."

He faced the Potions professor. "I do feel that they were unfairly given to me, sir. I will not deny that. However, it was fully my intention to be at detention tonight, tomorrow and Monday, since they had been given. The only reason my parents were notified was that I wanted them to get a story that was as close to the truth as it could be, having filtered through my perceptions of the incident. I did not wish them receiving an owl with third- or fourth-hand information, by which point the story likely would have involved you dragging me down to the dungeons by my hair and cutting me up for potions ingredients. It was never my intention to let Professor McGonagall

know at all. I will swear to all that I've just said under a magically binding oath, if that's what it takes."

Snape looked at him for a very long moment before simply nodding to the group and stalking back toward the castle, cape billowing behind him. "Am I the only one that thinks he looks like a demented butterfly when he does that?" Lily asked quietly. A quiet snort of humour came from one of the people still there, but Harry had trouble believing that it was the person that his ears told him that it was. *Professor McGonagall would never laugh like that in front of students*, he thought.

"So, Harry, since we're here, think we can talk about the rest of your letter?" Sirius asked.

"It's not really that major. Umbridge has a serious hate on for me. With her being a sycophant of Fudge's, anyone who even thinks about disagreeing with the Ministry line about all being well and no Voldemort sightings can happen because he's really dead is going to face her wrath."

"I think I'm in love," laughed Willow. "I've never heard anyone ever deliver a line in my style before and still have control of the sentence by the time that they reached the end of it." She walked forward to meet the group.

"Ah, Miss Rosenberg," the Headmaster said. "Have you been able to settle in properly?"

"Yes, thank you, sir," she replied. "Delightfully comfortable bedroom. Makes me dread leaving the school to continue my research project."

"Ah," McGonagall said. "I had best return to the castle myself."

"Plausible deniability is such a wonderful phrase," Willow quipped as the Deputy Headmistress left the Quidditch pitch.

When she was gone, Harry said simply, "Mum, Dad, this is Willow Rosenberg, from California. She's here to research the ... well, you remember the diary, the cup and that ring? She's researching the thing they have in common." Lily and Sirius nodded.

"I won't ask particulars," Lily said, "but I am curious how the search is going."

"I've only just started," Willow said. "I'll be needing to hit London at some point to look up the Watchers, since they've got a neat library, complete with some access to the World Wide Web." Everyone except Hermione was now looking at her in confusion. "Never mind. It means that I potentially have a greater range of study than I would in a library like the one here."

"If you need any help, Harry can put you in touch with myself, Sirius, or the old Defence teacher, James Potter," Lily said.

"I'll let you know," Willow said with a smile. "Now, I think I'll head back up to the castle and do some research, and let Harry meet with his parents." She gently grabbed Hermione and pulled her away. Hermione wasn't fighting terribly hard, either. Professor Dumbledore joined them.

Sirius spoke up. "So what's this about not trusting Minerva?"

"Probably stupid of me," Harry replied, "but her comment to me on Monday really got my goat. Heck, I think it got one of Aberforth Dumbledore's goats!" Lily snickered as he continued. "Umbridge was going off on how we don't need to practice any of the spells, since a proper reading of the text, which is a cure for insomnia if I ever saw one, will enable us to pass our O.W.L.s just fine without actually casting the spells."

"Is she a moron?" Sirius asked.

"No, she's just afraid that if the students actually learn something, they might not keep their feelings of security about the way that the Ministry runs things," Lily replied. "But please continue with the explanation, Harry." She looked at Sirius, who had been about to respond to her.

"Well, the whole class got a little up in arms about it, and the conversation ended up talking about last year. When I insisted that Voldemort is back, she expelled me from her classroom for the rest of the day, with a note to take to Professor McGonagall. The professor

basically informed me that it didn't matter whether or not I was telling the truth, what mattered was not being noticed by the Ministry, and that the detention would stand. So I spent the rest of the week doing lines." Harry scowled. "It's just that I can't wrap my brain around a teacher actually telling me that lying is the right thing to do. I mean, I can see it if it's something small and you're saving someone's feelings in the process, or if you're saving a life or something with a lie, but to save your own skin just to avoid an unjust punishment? That starts a slippery slope, doesn't it?"

His parents frowned as they looked at him. "You have a point," Sirius finally said. "I think I need to talk to Minerva about this, to be honest. She's got to work fairly hard to repair things with you, am I right?"

"I'm not sure that I'll ever completely trust her on issues like this again. Will I get the safe answer or the Gryffindor answer?" They continued to visit for a while, with Sienna and James coming down to see their parents as well, before they finally split away, Harry and his siblings for dinner and his parents heading to speak to the Deputy Headmistress.

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They spent the whole of Sunday in the common room, buried in their books while the room around them filled up, then emptied. It was another clear, fine day and most of their fellow Gryffindors spent the day out in the grounds, enjoying what might well be some of the last sunshine that year. By the evening, Harry felt as though somebody had been beating his brain against the inside of his skull.

"You know, we probably should try and get more homework done during the week," Harry muttered to Ron, as they finally laid aside Professor McGonagall's long essay on the *Inanimatus Conjurus* Spell and turned miserably to Professor Sinistra's equally long and difficult essay about Jupiter's many moons.

"Yeah," said Ron, rubbing slightly bloodshot eyes and throwing his fifth spoiled bit of parchment into the fire beside them. "Listen ... shall we just ask Hermione if we can have a look at what she's done?"

"You know she won't do that, Ron, unless you've got a good portion of it already done."

And so they continued to work on while the sky outside the windows became steadily darker. Slowly, the crowd in the common room began to thin again. At half past eleven, Hermione wandered over to them, yawning.

"Nearly done?"

"No," said Ron shortly.

"Jupiter's biggest moon is Ganymede, not Callisto," she said, pointing over Ron's shoulder at a line in his Astronomy essay, "and it's Io that's got the volcanoes."

"Thanks," snarled Ron, scratching out the offending sentences.

"Sorry, I only -"

"Yeah, well, if you've just come over here to criticise -"

"Ron -"

He waved a hand in front of his eyes. "You're right, Hermione. I'm sorry for snapping at you. I made the mistake of letting it all go until today because I was worried about the Quidditch try-outs and then the practice yesterday. That's no reason for me to explode at you when you're trying to help me." He looked up apologetically at her, receiving a smile in response. She looked about to say something else, but then looked at the nearest window and pointed. A handsome screech owl was standing on the windowsill, gazing into the room at Ron.

"Isn't that Hermes?" said Hermione, sounding amazed.

"Blimey, it is!" said Ron quietly, throwing down his quill and getting to his feet. "What's Percy writing to me for?"

He crossed to the window and opened it. Hermes flew inside, landed on Ron's essay and held out a leg to which a letter was attached.

Ron took the letter off it and the owl departed at once, leaving inky footprints across Ron's drawing of the moon lo.

"That's definitely Percy's handwriting," said Ron, sinking back into his chair and staring at the words on the outside of the scroll: *Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor House, Hogwarts*. He looked up at the other two. "What d'you reckon?"

"Open it!" said Hermione eagerly, and Harry nodded.

Ron unrolled the scroll and began to read. The further down the parchment his eyes travelled, the more pronounced became his scowl. When he had finished reading, he looked disgusted. He thrust the letter at Harry and Hermione, who leaned towards each other to read it together:

Dear Ron,

I want to give you some advice, which is why I am sending this at night rather than by the usual morning post. Hopefully, you will be able to read this away from prying eyes and avoid awkward questions.

From something the Minister let slip during one of our meetings, I gather that you are still seeing a lot of Harry Potter. I must tell you, Ron, that nothing could put your chances of gainful employment after Hogwarts in danger more than continued fraternisation with that boy. Yes, I am sure you are surprised to hear this – no doubt you will say that Potter has always been Dumbledore's favourite – but I feel bound to tell you that Dumbledore may not be in charge at Hogwarts much longer and the people who count have a very different – and probably more accurate – view of Potter's behaviour. I shall say no more here, but if you look at the Daily Prophet tomorrow you will get a good idea of the way the wind is blowing – and see if you can spot yours truly!

Seriously, Ron, you do not want to be tarred with the same brush as Potter, it could be very damaging to your future prospects, and I am talking here about life after school, too, remember.

It may be that you are afraid to sever ties with Potter – I know that he can be unbalanced and, for all I know, violent – but if you have any

worries about this, or have spotted anything else in Potter's behaviour that is troubling you, I urge you to speak to Dolores Umbridge, a truly delightful woman who I know will be only too happy to advise you.

This leads me to my other bit of advice. As I have hinted above, Dumbledore's regime at Hogwarts may soon be over. Your loyalty, Ron, should be not to him, but to the school and the Ministry. I am very sorry to hear that, so far, Professor Umbridge is encountering very little co-operation from staff as she strives to make those necessary changes within Hogwarts that the Ministry so ardently desires (although she should find this easier from next week – again, see the Daily Prophet tomorrow!). I shall say only this – a student who shows himself willing to help Professor Umbridge now may be very well-placed for Head Boyship in a couple of years!

I am sorry that I was unable to see more of you over the summer. It pains me to criticise our parents, but I am afraid I can no longer live under their roof while they remain mixed up with the dangerous crowd around Dumbledore. I count myself very lucky to have escaped the stigma of association with such people - the Minister really could not be more gracious to me – and I do hope, Ron, that you will not allow family ties to blind you to the misguided nature of our parents' beliefs and actions, either. I sincerely hope that, in time, they will realise how mistaken they were and I shall, of course, be ready to accept a full apology when that day comes.

Please think over what I have said most carefully, particularly the bit about Harry Potter.

Your brother,

Percy

Harry looked up at Ron.

“Well,” he said, trying to sound as though he found the whole thing a joke, “if you want to – er – what is it?” - he checked Percy's letter - “Oh yeah - 'sever ties' with me, I swear I won't get violent.”

“Give it back,” said Ron, holding out his hand. As he systematically shredded the letter into tiny pieces, he growled, “Git thinks he can

dictate who my friends are – thinks he can tell me that I should choose my friends based on Ministry guidelines – well, he can kiss my freckled arse!” The pieces flew into the fire violently, flaring brightly as they burned. “Come on, we’ve got to get this finished sometime before dawn,” he said briskly to Harry, pulling Professor Sinistra’s essay back towards him.

Hermione was looking at Ron with an odd expression on her face. “Oh, give them here,” she said abruptly.

“What?” asked Ron, thoroughly confused.

“Give them to me, I’ll look through them and correct them,” she said.

“Are you serious? Ah, Hermione, you’re a life-saver,” said Ron, “what can I –?”

“What you can say is, ‘We promise we’ll never leave our homework this late again,’” she said, holding out both hands for their essays, but she looked slightly amused all the same.

“Thanks a million, Hermione,” said Harry weakly, passing over his essay and sinking back into his armchair, rubbing his eyes.

It was now past midnight and the common room was deserted but for the three of them and Crookshanks. The only sound was that of Hermione’s quill scratching out sentences here and there on their essays and the ruffle of pages as she checked various facts in the reference books strewn across the table. Harry was exhausted. He also felt an odd, sick, empty feeling in his stomach that had nothing to do with tiredness and everything to do with the letter now curling blackly in the heart of the fire.

He knew that half the people inside Hogwarts thought him strange, even mad; he knew that the *Daily Prophet* had been making snide allusions to him for months, but there was something about seeing it written down like that in Percys writing, about knowing that Percy was advising Ron to drop him and even to tell tales about him to Umbridge, that made his situation real to him as nothing else had. He had known Percy for four years, had stayed in his house during the summer holidays, and even shared a tent with him during the

Quidditch World Cup, yet now Percy thought him unbalanced and possibly violent.

"OK, write that down," Hermione said to Ron, pushing his essay and a sheet covered in her own writing back to Ron, "then add this conclusion I've written for you."

"Hermione, you are honestly the most wonderful person I've ever met," said Ron weakly, "and if I'm ever rude to you again -"

"- I'll know you're back to normal," said Hermione wryly. "Harry, yours is OK except for this bit at the end, I think you must have misheard Professor Sinistra, Europa's covered in ice, not mice -"

"Hey, I've been studying and writing for something like thirteen hours," he laughed. "I think the occasional mistake is understandable. She might even let it slide just for amusement value." He grabbed the parchment from her and began to work on the small changes that she had made.

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They had expected to have to comb Hermione's *Daily Prophet* carefully next morning to find the article Percy had mentioned in his letter. However, the departing delivery owl had barely cleared the top of the milk jug when Hermione let out a huge gasp and flattened the newspaper to reveal a large photograph of Dolores Umbridge, smiling widely and blinking slowly at them from beneath the headline.

MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM

DOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED

FIRST EVER HIGH INQUISITOR

'Umbridge - "High Inquisitor"?' said Harry darkly, his half-eaten piece of toast slipping from his fingers. 'What does *that* mean?' Hermione read aloud:

"In a surprise move last night the Ministry of Magic passed new legislation giving itself an unprecedented level of control at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"The Minister has been growing uneasy about goings-on at Hogwarts for some time," said junior Assistant to the Minister, Percy Weasley. 'He is now responding to concerns voiced by anxious parents, who feel the school may be moving in a direction they do not approve of.'"

"This is not the first time in recent weeks that the Minister, Cornelius Fudge, has used new laws to effect improvements at the wizarding school. As recently as 30 August, Educational Decree Number Twenty-two was passed, to ensure that, in the event of the current Headmaster being unable to provide a candidate for a teaching post, the Ministry should select an appropriate person. 'That's how Dolores Umbridge came to be appointed to the teaching staff at Hogwarts,' said Weasley last night. 'Dumbledore couldn't find anyone so the Minister put in Umbridge, and of course, she's been an immediate success -'"

'She's been a WHAT?' said Harry loudly. 'Wait, there's more,' said Hermione grimly.

"'- an immediate success, totally revolutionising the teaching of Defence Against the Dark Arts and providing the Minister with on-the-ground feedback about what's really happening at Hogwarts.'"

"It is this last function that the Ministry has now formalised with the passing of Educational Decree Number Twenty-three, which creates the new position of Hogwarts High Inquisitor."

"This is an exciting new phase in the Minister's plan to get to grips with what some are calling the falling standards at Hogwarts,' said Weasley. 'The Inquisitor will have powers to inspect her fellow educators and make sure that they are coming up to scratch. Professor Umbridge has been offered this position in addition to her own teaching post and we are delighted to say that she has accepted.'"

"The Ministry's new moves have received enthusiastic support from parents of students at Hogwarts."

"I feel much easier in my mind now that I know Dumbledore is being subjected to fair and objective evaluation," said Mr Lucius Malfoy, 41, speaking from his Wiltshire mansion last night. 'Many of us with our children's best interests at heart have been concerned about some of Dumbledore's eccentric decisions in the last few years and are glad to know that the Ministry is keeping an eye on the situation.'"

"Among those eccentric decisions are undoubtedly the controversial staff appointments previously described in this newspaper, which have included the employment of werewolf Remus Lupin, half-giant Rubeus Hagrid and the mentally unstable ex-Auror, James Potter."

"Rumours abound, of course, that Albus Dumbledore, once Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, is no longer up to the task of managing the prestigious school of Hogwarts."

"I think the appointment of the Inquisitor is a first step towards ensuring that Hogwarts has a headmaster in whom we can all repose our confidence," said a Ministry insider last night."

"Wizengamot elders Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden have resigned in protest at the introduction of the post of Inquisitor to Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts is a school, not an outpost of Cornelius Fudge's office," said Madam Marchbanks. 'This is a further, disgusting attempt to discredit Albus Dumbledore.'"

"(For a full account of Madam Marchbanks's alleged links to subversive goblin groups, turn to page seventeen.)"

Hermione finished reading and looked across the table at the other two.

"So now we know how we ended up with Umbridge! Fudge passed this 'Educational Decree' and forced her on us! And now he's given her the power to inspect the other teachers!" Hermione was breathing fast and her eyes were very bright. "I can't believe this. It's outrageous!"

"I know it is," said Harry. He looked down at his right hand, clenched on the table-top, and saw the faint white outline of the words Umbridge had forced him to cut into his skin. "How long before Filch convinces her to allow him to whip the students?"

Surprisingly though, a grin was unfurling on Ron's face.

"What?" said Harry and Hermione together, staring at him.

"Oh, I can't wait to see McGonagall inspected," said Ron happily. "Umbridge won't know what's hit her." The Trio laughed at the thought.

They heard later that day that Trelawney had been inspected, Parvati and Lavender having nothing good to say about Umbridge and her methods. They made it to Defence Against the Dark Arts and sat down.

As soon as everyone was seated, Umbridge smiled and said, "Wands away", and those people who had been hopeful enough to take them out sadly returned them to their bags. "As we finished Chapter One last lesson, I would like you all to turn to page nineteen today and commence 'Chapter Two, Common Defensive Theories and their Derivation'. There will be no need to talk."

Still smiling her wide, self-satisfied smile, she sat down at her desk. The class gave an audible sigh as it turned, as one, to page nineteen. Harry wondered dully whether there were enough chapters in the book to keep them reading through all this year's lessons and was on the point of checking the contents page when he noticed that Hermione had her hand in the air again.

Professor Umbridge had noticed, too, and what was more, she seemed to have worked out a strategy for just such an eventuality. Instead of trying to pretend she had not noticed Hermione she got to her feet and walked around the front row of desks until they were face to face, then she bent down and whispered, so that the rest of the class could not hear, "What is it this time, Miss Granger?"

"I've already read Chapter Two," said Hermione.

"Well then, proceed to Chapter Three."

"I've read that too. I've read the whole book."

Professor Umbridge blinked but recovered her poise almost instantly.

"Well, then, you should be able to tell me what Slinkhard says about counter-jinxes in Chapter Fifteen."

"He says that counter-jinxes are improperly named," said Hermione promptly. "He says 'counter-jinx' is just a name people give their jinxes when they want to make them sound more acceptable."

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows and Harry knew she was impressed, against her will.

"But I disagree," Hermione continued.

Professor Umbridge's eyebrows rose a little higher and her gaze became distinctly colder. "You disagree?" she repeated.

"Yes, I do," said Hermione, who, unlike Umbridge, was not whispering, but speaking in a clear, carrying voice that had by now attracted the attention of the rest of the class. "Mr Slinkhard doesn't like jinxes, does he? But I think they can be very useful when they're used defensively."

"Oh, you do, do you?" said Professor Umbridge, forgetting to whisper and straightening up. "Well, I'm afraid it is Mr Slinkhard's opinion, and not yours, that matters within this classroom, Miss Granger."

"But -" Hermione began.

"That is enough," said Professor Umbridge. She walked back to the front of the class and stood before them, all the jauntiness she had shown at the beginning of the lesson gone. "Miss Granger, I am going to take five points from Gryffindor house."

There was an outbreak of muttering at this.

"What for?" said Harry angrily.

"Don't you get involved!" Hermione whispered urgently to him.

“For disrupting my class with pointless interruptions,” said Professor Umbridge smoothly. “I am here to teach you using a Ministry-approved method that does not include inviting students to give their opinions on matters about which they understand very little. Your previous teacher in this subject may have allowed you more licence, but as only Professor Quirrell would have passed a Ministry inspection -”

“Yeah, Quirrell was a great teacher,” said Harry loudly, “there was just that minor drawback of him having Lord Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head.”

This pronouncement was followed by one of the loudest silences Harry had ever heard. Then – “I think another week's detentions would do you some good, Mr Potter,” said Umbridge sleekly.

“Gonna keep carving lines in my hand until I follow the Ministry approved lies?” he barked back.

“That is it, Mister Potter!” Umbridge screamed. “Leave my class this instant and do not return! You are expelled from this class!”

He stood and grabbed his bag. “The small minded do not like changes to their world view,” he said just as he exited the room, slamming it hard after his pronouncement. He Disillusioned himself immediately as he heard the door swing open, and Umbridge, a distinctly ugly shade of red, exploded into the hallway.

“You will regret crossing me when I see you next, Potter!” she shrieked. “I will break you of this delusion, even if I have to sentence you to the Long Term Care ward in St. Mungo's!”

Harry chuckled to himself and walked softly away from the room, heading back to Gryffindor Tower.

His humour didn't last long, as he was approached by Professor McGonagall at dinner and informed that not only was he to do the week's worth of detention, he had also cost Gryffindor five points.

“Why?” he asked angrily.

"You will not take that tone with me if you wish to avoid more points being taken," she replied dangerously. "And the reason is that if you would not listen to me last Monday, when a mere detention was given, perhaps knowing that you may well lose Gryffindor the House Cup might sink in." Her voice dropped. "I warned you last Monday that she is not the woman to cross. Perhaps now you will listen to me." She turned and stalked to the head table.

"Just think," Harry grumbled, "the new Gryffindor trait to follow is cowardice."

"You *are* drawing attention to yourself," Hermione said softly.

"I was supposed to sit there and let her say that a guy carrying Voldemort on the back of his head was a good teacher? The bastard tried to kill me!"

"It's just that ... well, I worry about you, Harry," she said. Her eyes were shining as if tears were about to fall.

"What do I do? Let her get away with lying to the students? I've not put up with that in the last four years, why should I start now?"

"Because if they have an excuse, they'll expel you!" said Hermione.

"So in a choice between expulsion or staying in school, I should stay in school?"

"Yes!" she replied.

His face fell. "If I have a choice between doing the wrong thing, lying and staying safe, or being honest, doing the right thing, which gets me expelled ..."

Hermione went white as she realised the implications of her statements and cradled her face in her hands, crying softly. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he said softly, "but you needed to know how it sounds to me."

"I know," she replied finally, sniffing. "That's why I was crying. It's lose-lose for you, isn't it? Give up your principles or get expelled."

His detention with Umbridge went as the previous ones had – long and bloody. He refused to speak, however, which seemed to annoy her. He was finally released with a reminder that he had another four days to look forward to.

The next day was double Charms, followed by double Transfiguration. The Charms class was as bland and useless as they expected, but Harry knew that McGonagall's class would be interesting as soon as he entered the room. Professor Umbridge and her clipboard were sitting in a corner. “Excellent,” whispered Ron, as they sat down in their usual seats. “Let's see Umbridge get what she deserves.”

Professor McGonagall marched into the room without giving the slightest indication that she knew Professor Umbridge was there.

“That will do,” she said and silence fell immediately. “Mr Finnigan, kindly come here and hand back the homework – Miss Brown, please take this box of mice – don't be silly, girl, they won't hurt you – and hand one to each student -”

“Hem, hem,” said Professor Umbridge, employing the same silly little cough she had used to interrupt Dumbledore on the first night of term. Professor McGonagall ignored her. Seamus handed back Harry's essay; Harry took it without looking at him and saw, to his relief, that he had managed an 'A'.

“Right then, everyone, listen closely – Dean Thomas, if you do that to the mouse again I shall put you in detention – most of you have now successfully Vanished your snails and even those who were left with a certain amount of shell have got the gist of the spell. Today, we shall be -”

“Hem, hem,” said Professor Umbridge.

“Yes?” said Professor McGonagall, turning round, her eyebrows so close together they seemed to form one long, severe line.

“I was just wondering, Professor, whether you received my note telling you of the date and time of your inspec-”

“Obviously I received it, or I would have asked you what you are doing in my classroom,” said Professor McGonagall, turning her back firmly on Professor Umbridge. Many of the students exchanged looks of glee. “As I was saying: today, we shall be practising the altogether more difficult Vanishment of mice. Now, the Vanishing Spell -”

“Hem, hem.”

“I wonder,” said Professor McGonagall in cold fury, turning on Professor Umbridge, “how you expect to gain an idea of my usual teaching methods if you continue to interrupt me? You see, I do not generally permit people to talk when I am talking.”

Professor Umbridge looked as though she had just been slapped in the face. She did not speak, but straightened the parchment on her clipboard and began scribbling furiously.

Looking supremely unconcerned, Professor McGonagall addressed the class once more.

“As I was saying: the Vanishing Spell becomes more difficult with the complexity of the animal to be Vanished. The snail, as an invertebrate, does not present much of a challenge; the mouse, as a mammal, offers a much greater one. This is not, therefore, magic you can accomplish with your mind on your dinner. So - you know the incantation, let me see what you can do ...”

“How she can lecture me about not losing my temper with Umbridge!” Harry muttered to Ron under his breath, but he was grinning - his anger with Professor McGonagall had quite evaporated, at least right now. He knew that he'd soon be angry again for her blatant hypocrisy, but for the moment he was happy to see Umbridge put in her place.

Professor Umbridge did not follow Professor McGonagall around the class as she had followed Professor Trelawney, according to Parvati; perhaps Umbridge realised that McGonagall would not permit it. She did, however, take many more notes while sitting in her corner, and when Professor McGonagall finally told them all to pack away, she rose with a grim expression on her face.

“Well, it's a start,” said Ron, holding up a long wriggling mouse-tail and dropping it back into the box Lavender was passing around.

As they filed out of the classroom, Harry saw Professor Umbridge approach the teacher's desk; he nudged Ron, who nudged Hermione in turn, and the three of them deliberately fell back to eavesdrop.

“How long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?” Professor Umbridge asked.

“Thirty-nine years this December,” said Professor McGonagall brusquely, snapping her bag shut.

Professor Umbridge made a note.

“Very well,” she said, “you will receive the results of your inspection in ten days' time.”

“I can hardly wait,” said Professor McGonagall, in a coldly indifferent voice, and she strode off towards the door. “Hurry up, you three,” she added, sweeping Harry, Ron and Hermione before her.

Harry could not help giving her a faint smile and could have sworn he received one in return.

He was surprised to see Umbridge at Care of Magical Creatures as well. Upon finding that Professor Grubbly-Plank was a temporary teacher, she did something different and questioned the students about various creatures, which they seemed to answer fairly well.

“Overall,” said Professor Umbridge, returning to Professor Grubbly-Plank's side after a lengthy interrogation of Dean Thomas, “how do you, as a temporary member of staff – an objective outsider, I suppose you might say – how do you find Hogwarts? Do you feel you receive enough support from the school management?”

“Oh, yes, Dumbledore's excellent,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank heartily. “Yes, I'm very happy with the way things are run, very happy indeed.”

Looking politely incredulous, Umbridge made a tiny note on her clipboard and went on, "And what are you planning to cover with this class this year – assuming, of course, that Professor Hagrid does not return?"

"Oh, I'll take them through the creatures that most often come up in OWL," said Professor Grubbly-Plank. "Not much left to do – they've studied unicorns and Nifflers, I thought we'd cover Porlocks and Kneazles, make sure they can recognise Crups and Knarls, you know ..."

"Well, *you* seem to know what you're doing, at any rate," said Professor Umbridge, making a very obvious tick on her clipboard. Harry did not like the emphasis she put on 'you' and liked it even less when she put her next question to Goyle. "Now, I hear there have been injuries in this class?"

Goyle gave a stupid grin. Malfoy hastened to answer the question.

"That was me," he said. "I was slashed by a Hippogriff."

"A Hippogriff?" said Professor Umbridge, now scribbling frantically.

"Only because he was too stupid to listen to what Hagrid told him to do," said Harry angrily.

Both Ron and Hermione groaned. Professor Umbridge turned her head slowly in Harry's direction.

"Another nights detention, I think," she said softly. "Well, thank you very much, Professor Grubbly-Plank, I think that's all I need here. You will be receiving the results of your inspection within ten days."

"Jolly good," said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and Professor Umbridge began to set off back across the lawn to the castle.

"Professor Umbridge," Harry said loudly.

"Yes, Mister Potter?" she asked sweetly.

"Black," he answered simply. "Since I have received a detention for making a disparaging remark about the intelligence of a fellow student, may I at least ask a Ministry expert how one should approach a hippogriff?"

"You bow to it and wait for it to acknowledge you," she answered, as if Harry had to be an idiot to ask.

"Would you be willing to ask my classmates how Mr. Malfoy approached the hippogriff? And how I approached it?"

"That is unimportant, Mister Potter. You disparaged the intelligence of a fellow student. That is what your detention is for." She left before he could speak again. Surprisingly, he had a smile on his face, although it worried some of his friends.

"See, Draco? Even she admits that you didn't follow the Ministry guidelines for approaching a hippogriff. Even if she won't say it out loud, *she* says that you were an idiot as well." He grinned and turned back to the lesson.

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It was nearly midnight when Harry left Umbridge's office that night, his hand now bleeding so severely that it was staining the scarf he had wrapped around it. He expected the common room to be empty when he returned, but Ron and Hermione had sat up waiting for him. He was pleased to see them, especially as Hermione was disposed to be sympathetic rather than critical.

"Here," she said anxiously, pushing a small bowl of yellow liquid towards him, "soak your hand in that, it's a solution of strained and pickled Murtlap tentacles, it should help." Harry placed his bleeding, aching hand into the bowl and experienced a wonderful feeling of relief. Crookshanks curled around his legs, purring loudly, then leapt into his lap and settled down.

"Thanks," he said gratefully, scratching behind Crookshanks's ears with his left hand.

"I still reckon you should complain about this," said Ron in a low voice.

"No," said Harry flatly.

"McGonagall would go nuts if she knew -"

"Yeah, she probably would," said Harry dully. "And how long do you reckon it'd take Umbridge to pass another decree saying anyone who complains about the High Inquisitor gets sacked immediately? Let's not mention the fact that she's a hypocrite, complaining about me getting angry and not thinking of the consequences, but she's in as much danger as I'm in, because she could lose her job. But she can get angry at Umbridge. Me? She'd likely say that I deserve these scars, because I didn't hold my tongue around a dangerous opponent."

Ron opened his mouth to retort but nothing came out and, after a moment, he closed it again, defeated.

"She's an awful woman," said Hermione in a small voice. "Awful. You know, I was just saying to Ron when you came in... we've got to do something about her."

"I suggested poison," said Ron grimly.

"No ... I mean, something about what a dreadful teacher she is, and how we're not going to learn any Defence from her at all," said Hermione.

"Well, what can we do about that?" said Ron, yawning. "It's too late, isn't it? She's got the job, she's here to stay. Fudge'll make sure of that."

Harry laughed. "I think I know where Hermione is going with this, and I wonder if James Potter knew that it would be like this, or if giving me the notes put the idea in Hermione's head?"

"I think it's a mixture of them both," Hermione said with a smile. "So, will you do it?"

"Do what?" Ron asked, yawning again.

"Start our own Defence class," Harry grinned. "I have the notes, so whomever would take it on would need to borrow them."

Hermione blushed. "Well, I did an informal poll of Gryffindor Tower, and they all suggest that you would get best results as teacher."

He blinked a few times. "Well, I guess it's me, then. But why?"

"You're the best Defence student we know, Harry. You consistently get better grades than anyone else, and there's that little bit that Professors Black and Lupin taught you after last year's little Azkaban fiasco." She tried to make it sound light, but her voice still held considerable anger for his treatment.

"What, the Patronus?" he asked.

"You say that like it's a first level Unlocking Spell," Ron snorted, "rather than something that even most Aurors have trouble casting. That's a pretty powerful piece of magic there, Harry."

"Okay, so I'm the most impressive student here," he murmured. "When do we set up for starting this?"

"I think we'll have to work on getting a meeting together for finding out who is going to be showing up to the classes I'll be running. Probably be best to set it up during the first of our Hogsmeade weekends. Question is, where can we meet?"

Hermione laughed and pulled out a piece of parchment. With a smile on her face, she did something she never did while writing a letter – say what she was writing as she wrote it.

Dear Professors,

In case you don't recognise my handwriting, this is Hermione Granger, and I have a question for you.

Harry, who is working on homework as I write this, would like to invite some friends over during the first Hogsmeade weekend. The students can all see how you're doing (many keep asking after you, especially

after that last visit), and we can talk about the way things are going at the school so far.

Oh, could you please thank Professor Potter for us? That list of things to read will come in so handy this year.

With thanks,

Hermione Granger

"I can send this first thing tomorrow, if you don't mind me borrowing Hedwig," she said.

"If she doesn't mind, I certainly don't."

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His detentions went as expected, and he was now quite certain that he would have the marks across his hand for the rest of his life. His attitude toward most teachers changed – he became silent except when specifically called upon in class. This was noticed by the teachers and led to Professor Pettigrew, the only teacher exempt from the silent treatment, to talk to him the Thursday before Hogsmeade.

"Does this 'party' your family is throwing Saturday have anything to do with why you've changed in all your classes? Why I'm the only teacher whom you'll act normal around?"

"Mostly. I've been getting detentions with Umbridge because I won't let go the concept that Voldemort is back. McGonagall is of the mind that only she is allowed to get angry at Umbridge for her heavy-handed work around the school – students like me are supposed to keep their temper. Might be the first time in my life that I've ever been told that getting righteously angry is an adult prerogative. I know that I'm not an adult, but apparently I only develop a proper sense of right and wrong when I leave Hogwarts."

Peter blinked for a few seconds. "She really told you not to get angry?"

"I was told to keep my temper in check and my head down, because of what was at stake. Don't let Umbridge goad me. Yet when Umbridge inspected her class, there was no doubt whatsoever that McGonagall was angry, and that Umbridge knew it. Therefore, our Transfiguration professor is a hypocrite. 'I am permitted to get angry at her, but you are not adult enough yet' is how it comes across to me." Peter winced, but let the conversation slide away to other, less touchy subjects.

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Saturday dawned bright and chilly, and every eligible student was itching to get into Hogsmeade to enjoy what could likely be the last sunny day until the spring season came along. It was quite the crowd that left for the village – Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Angelina, Fred, George, Katie, Alicia, Parvati, Padma, Neville and Harry. He had his arm around Parvati's waist, and Alicia kept laughing.

"Isn't it usually the other way around, Parvati?" she asked. "He puts his hand there and you remove it?"

"He won't leave it there to let me remove it, so I have to put it there!" was the laughing response. "If he'd just leave it there ..."

"You'd never let me remove it," said Harry.

"Are you complaining about having your hand on my arse?"

"Do I *look* stupid?" he answered her with a laugh. He leaned in and whispered, "It makes me want to peel you away and find a place to hide for the rest of the weekend. Clothing optional."

She groaned. "You are going to pay for that, Harry," she said. "I think the Quidditch Hotties and I are going to have to drag you into the locker rooms later. You may not survive it, but you'll definitely die happy."

"Time well spent, then," he laughed in return.

They made it to the Black home in Hogsmeade to find Sirius and Lily waiting for them outside on the patio. They'd laid out a number of

chairs, and there was also a cooler nearby. "Welcome!" Sirius called out. "Is this all of you?"

"No," Hermione said before anyone else could respond. "There are more people coming." Half an hour later, they understood what she meant, and Harry was actually a little scared. Gathered on the patio, along with the other eleven that he had come down with were fellow Gryffindors Dean, Lavender, Colin and Dennis Creevey and Lee Jordan. From Hufflepuff came Ernie, Justin, Hannah, and two others whom he did not know – a girl with a long plait down her back, and a boy with an upturned nose. He was fairly sure that the fellow played Quidditch. As for the Ravenclaw contingent, there was Cho and a giggling friend of hers that Harry couldn't name, Luna, and three boys who he was pretty sure were named Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner and Terry Boot.

"Well, this is a bit more than I expected, I have to admit," Harry mused to some laughter. "I suppose we should get down to things. We're here to talk about trying to set up some real Defence Against the Dark Arts classes. I think Professor Potter had expected this, because he gave me his teaching notes."

"Will you make those notes available to everyone else?" Anthony Goldstein asked.

"If you're asking whether or not I'll make copies for everyone, the answer is no, unless he specifically tells me that it's all right. I'll be doing what I can to teach people what he planned on teaching, however."

"Why should we listen to you?" the snooty appearing Hufflepuff asked.

Sirius spoke up. "Can *you* cast a corporeal Patronus? James Potter and I taught Harry how to last year. Most people – most *Aurors* – can't manage that. Plus, if he's been reading the notes he was just referring to, as I'll bet he has been, he has a better idea of defence than anyone else here. And I say that as a professor, not as his father."

"Can you show us?" asked the girl with the plait.

Harry nodded, then thought for a moment. He thought of the first time he realised that Sirius thought of him as his son, and said, "*Expecto Patronum!*" A large silver stag erupted from his wand, making several of the girls shriek in surprise. It ran around the yard for a moment before stopping in front of Harry and performing what almost seemed to be a bow. Harry stepped back in surprise, and the stag faded.

"Why did it bow?" asked Michael Corner.

"Beats me," Harry said. "Dad?" Sirius shrugged.

"So what would we be doing, precisely?" Padma asked.

"Practising spells," Harry said. "Only our Defence teacher, and I use the term teacher loosely, only she thinks that reading the book will give us what we need to pass our O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s."

"More importantly," Hermione said, "we need to know how to defend ourselves. Voldemort is back."

As expected, people did not react well to the use of the name. The reaction was immediate and predictable. Cho's friend shrieked and slopped Butterbeer down herself; Terry Boot gave a kind of involuntary twitch; Padma Patil shuddered, and Neville gave an odd yelp that he managed to turn into a cough. All of them, however, looked fixedly, even eagerly, at Harry.

"Where's the proof?" asked the arrogant blond Hufflepuff.

"Well, Dumbledore believes it -" Hermione began.

"You mean, Dumbledore believes him," said the blond boy, nodding at Harry.

"Who are you?" said Ron, rather rudely. The look on Ron's face said that he knew he was being rude, and simply didn't care.

"Zacharias Smith," said the boy, "and I think we've got the right to know exactly what makes him say You-Know-Who's back."

"Look," said Hermione, intervening swiftly, "that's really not what this meeting was supposed to be about -"

"It's OK, Hermione," said Harry. It had just dawned on him why there were so many people there. He thought Hermione should have seen this coming. Some of these people – maybe even most of them – had turned up in the hopes of hearing Harry's story first-hand.

"What makes me say You-Know-Who's back?" he repeated, looking Zacharias straight in the face. "I saw him. But Dumbledore told the whole school what happened last year, and if you didn't believe him, you won't believe me, and I'm not wasting an afternoon trying to convince anyone."

The whole group seemed to have held its breath while Harry spoke.

Zacharias said dismissively, "All Dumbledore told us last year was that Cedric Diggory and Fleur were nearly killed by You-Know-Who and that you came crashing back to Hogwarts and passed out. He didn't give us details, he didn't tell us much of anything, I think we'd all like to know -"

"If you've come to hear exactly what it looks like when Voldemort murders someone I can't help you," Harry said. He did not take his eyes from Zacharias Smith's aggressive face. "I have been lucky enough to avoid seeing Voldemort kill anyone. I shudder to think what would have happened if Cedric and Fleur hadn't grabbed the Cup – I likely would have had to bring their bodies back with me, if I'd been able. But I have seen his cruelty face to face. I have watched the disgusting depths that he will sink to. And he won't even admit to his followers that he's one of the very people he wants dead – his own father was a Muggle!" He shook his head. "I could talk all day about that night, but I'd really rather not. Either you believe me or you don't."

"Nice speech," Smith said, "but it doesn't prove anything. You've a history of theatrics – your blood father even called you a drama queen or king or whatever that one year. What makes you any better at teaching us the spells than Umbridge? At least she's Ministry certified."

Sirius and Lily were a dark red and moments from speaking when Harry exploded. "*You don't know what it's like!* You've never had to face him. You think it's just memorising a bunch of spells and throwing them, like you're in class or something?" He stopped and took a deep breath, pacing as he spoke. "The whole time you're sure you know there's nothing between you and dying except your own – your own brain or guts or whatever – like you can think straight when you know you're about a nanosecond from being murdered, or tortured, or watching your friends die – they've never taught us that in their classes, what it's like to deal with things like that – Umbridge would probably die on the spot if she came face to face with Voldemort – and you sit there acting like I'm some attention seeking little prima donna. Y'know what, Smith? Just get the hell out of here. I don't think any of us need some stuck-up little Ministry sycophant whining about whether or not I'm telling the truth. Either you believe me or you don't. I've already told one of my fellow Gryffindors to go screw himself, so I see no problems with telling you the same. So if all you're going to do is sit there and be superior because you believe the crap the Ministry and the Daily Prophet spew, then I think you should be anywhere else." He stepped back and crossed his arms.

He was more than a little surprised to see every other student there turn and stare at Zacharias Smith. He almost fell over when the shy little Hannah Abbot stood up and walked over to Smith and slapped him across the face hard enough that his head was rocked. "Why do you always seem to have your head up your bum? I've never heard you say anything nice about anyone but yourself or your best friends."

Ernie MacMillan spoke up. "I screwed up back in second year. Big time. He's not been lying before. I trust him now. So either do like Hannah suggested and get your head out of your arse and support him, or get up and leave."

Terry Boot spoke up. "Answer me this, Black ... uh, Harry. Did you or did you not kill that basilisk in second year?"

"No, I didn't," Harry replied.

"Hah!" Smith yelled in triumph.

"I didn't kill it," Harry continued, "because I freed him from the domination of the previous speaker. It's still alive."

"You left a basilisk alive in the school's bowels?" Smith cried out. "What kind of an idiot are you?"

"The kind that refuses to kill a sentient being because *books* tell me it's evil. I talked with it, and it wanted free of its domination. Tell me, Smith – how many petrifications have happened since my second year, with all that Heir of Slytherin crap? Hmm? Since the end of that year, how many have been petrified or killed by the basilisk?"

Cho stood up and walked over by Harry. "I'm more impressed that he chose to talk to it and convinced it to stop killing. Shows a good head on his shoulders." She turned to face him and said, with an impish twinkle in her eyes, "I'll learn anything he's willing to teach me." The resulting blush drew laughter from everyone.

"Right," said Hermione, looking relieved that something had at last been settled, but a little bothered by Cho's final comment. "Well, then, the next question is how often we do it. I really don't think there's any point in meeting less than once a week -"

"Hang on," said Angelina, "we need to make sure this doesn't clash with our Quidditch practice."

"No," said Cho, "nor with ours."

"Nor ours," added Zacharias Smith.

"I'm sure we can find a night that suits everyone," said Hermione, slightly impatiently, "but you know, this is rather important, we're talking about learning to defend ourselves against V-Voldemort's Death Eaters -"

"Well said!" barked Ernie Macmillan. "Personally I think this is really important, possibly more important than anything else we'll do this year, even with our OWLs coming up!"

He looked around impressively, as though waiting for people to cry "Surely not!" When nobody spoke, he went on, "I, personally am at a

loss to see why the Ministry has foisted such a useless teacher on us at this critical period. Obviously, they are in denial about the return of You-Know-Who, but to give us a teacher who is trying to actively prevent us from using defensive spells -"

"We think the reason Umbridge doesn't want us trained in Defence Against the Dark Arts," said Hermione, "is that she's got some ... some mad idea that Dumbledore could use the students in the school as a kind of private army. She thinks he'd mobilise us against the Ministry."

"Works for me," growled Cho. "They found a way to retire Cedric's father when he refused to toe the Fudge line about Harry's pronouncement. I trust Harry, I trust Cedric, and I even trust Fleur's account, since she agrees with Cedric as to what happened."

"What happened to her?" one of the crowd asked. It was male, but Harry had been too surprised at the pretty Asian Ravenclaw's surprise announcement concerning Cedric's dad to pay attention to whom the speaker had been.

"She left at the end of last school year," Harry said simply. "Haven't heard from her since." There was something in his tone that made them drop that line of questioning.

"The other thing to decide is where we're going to meet," Hermione said.

This was rather more difficult; the whole group fell silent. "Library?" suggested Katie Bell after a few moments.

"I can't see Madam Pince being too chuffed with us doing jinxes in the library," said Harry.

"Maybe an unused classroom?" said Dean.

"Yeah," said Ron, "McGonagall might let us have hers, she did when Harry was practising for the Triwizard."

But Harry was pretty certain that McGonagall would not be so accommodating this time. For all that Hermione had said about study

and homework groups being allowed, he had the distinct feeling that this one might be considered a lot more rebellious.

“Right, well, we'll try to find somewhere,” said Hermione. “We'll send a message round to everybody when we've got a time and a place for the first meeting.”

She rummaged in her bag and produced parchment and a quill, then hesitated, rather as though she was steeling herself to say something.

“I - I think everybody should write their name down, just so we know who was here. But I also think,’ she took a deep breath, ‘that we all ought to agree not to shout about what we're doing. So if you sign, you're agreeing not to tell Umbridge or anybody else what we're up to.”

Fred reached out for the parchment and cheerfully wrote his signature, but Harry noticed at once that several people looked less than happy at the prospect of putting their names on the list.

“Er ...” said Zacharias slowly, not taking the parchment that George was trying to pass to him, “well ... I'm sure Ernie will tell me when the meeting is.”

But Ernie was looking rather hesitant about signing, too. Hermione raised her eyebrows at him.

“I - well, we *are* prefects,” Ernie burst out. “And if this list was found ... well, I mean to say ... you said yourself, if Umbridge finds out -”

“You just said this group was the most important thing you'd do this year,” Harry reminded him.

“I - yes,” said Ernie, “yes, I do believe that, it's just -”

“It's just that it's easier to talk than to actually have to back up your words,” Ginny said testily. “It's easier to let Harry run all the risk of punishment.”

“Ernie, do you really think I'd leave that list lying around?” added Hermione testily.

"No. No, of course not," said Ernie, looking slightly less anxious. "I - yes, of course I'll sign."

Nobody raised objections after Ernie, though Harry saw Cho's friend give her a rather reproachful look before adding her own name. When the last person - Zacharias - had signed, Hermione took the parchment back and slipped it carefully into her bag. There was an odd feeling in the group now. It was as though they had just signed some kind of contract.

"Well, time's ticking on," said Fred briskly, getting to his feet. "George, Lee and I have got items of a sensitive nature to purchase, we'll be seeing you all later." In twos and threes the rest of the group took their leave, too, until it was Harry and his sister, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, the Patils and the Gryffindor Quidditch girls left.

"About thirty," said Sirius happily. "Not bad. And one of them was Amelia Bones niece."

"Smart move on Cho Chang's part," Lily added. "It had gotten pretty tense before she did the obvious flirting with Harry."

"You mean she wasn't serious?" Harry asked with some relief. "I mean yeah, she's pretty, and ... well, I *am* fifteen if you get my meaning," he said with another colouring of his cheeks, "but I've got a lot going on right now. I'm not sure I could handle adding Cho to the mix."

"Well, if she asks," Padma replied, "what should I tell her?"

"Tell her that if she's serious, she has a gauntlet to make it past. Parvati, the Quidditch Hotties, Hermione, and Ginny."

"I didn't think you were dating either of them any more."

"Doesn't mean I don't trust their opinions," said Harry. "They're the first female friends I had outside my immediate family. Why wouldn't I ask their opinions?"

"Will you accept mine as well?" asked Padma with an odd tone to her voice.

"I don't know you as well as I'd like to, but ... well, it may be insulting, but you're an identical twin. Unless you've been working really hard to be her opposite, you're going to be a lot like Parvati. And I'm dating her. So I think I can trust you," he finished with a laugh.

"Would you date me as well?" she asked.

"You're the first to face the Gauntlet," he said, his face draining of colour.

"That was definitely the right answer," Padma said with a smile. "I will subject myself to their decision." She kissed his cheek and headed into Hogsmeade. Parvati smiled and headed with her after kissing him as well, although hers was a feather kiss on the lips.

"Don't I get a say?" Sienna asked, her hands planted on her hips. Harry smiled internally to see Ron's sudden realisation that his best friend's sister – the best friend of his own sister – was a girl who took after her mother a great deal. Ron looked stunned. He had the feeling it was the way that her chest moved under her shirt when she huffed at Harry.

Harry looked at her and said, "I should have mentioned you as well, and I'd appreciate the first one of you to run into the Patils to mention that. I wouldn't think of excluding my very first friend." He gave her a quick hug, and she relaxed into it.

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Harry felt happier for the rest of the weekend than he had done all term. He and Ron spent much of Sunday catching up with all their homework again, and although this could hardly be called fun, the last burst of autumn sunshine persisted, so rather than sitting hunched over tables in the common room they took their work outside and lounged in the shade of a large beech tree on the edge of the lake. Knowing they were doing something to resist Umbridge and the Ministry (and that he was a key part of the rebellion) gave Harry a feeling of immense satisfaction. He kept reliving Saturdays meeting in his mind: all those people, coming to him to learn Defence Against the Dark Arts ... and the looks on their faces as they had heard some of the things he had done ... and Cho praising his performance in the

Triwizard Tournament – knowing all those people did not think him a lying weirdo, but someone to be admired, buoyed him up so much that he was still cheerful on Monday morning, despite the imminent prospect of all his least favourite classes.

He and Ron headed downstairs from their dormitory, discussing Angelina's idea that they were to work on a new move called the Sloth Grip Roll during that night's Quidditch practice, and not until they were halfway across the sunlit common room did they notice the addition to the room that had already attracted the attention of a small group of people.

A large sign had been affixed to the Gryffindor noticeboard; so large it covered everything else on it - the lists of secondhand spellbooks for sale, the regular reminders of school rules from Argus Filch, the Quidditch team training timetable, the offers to barter certain Chocolate Frog Cards for others, the Weasleys' latest advertisement for testers, the dates of the Hogsmeade weekends and the lost and found notices. The new sign was printed in large black letters and there was a highly official-looking seal at the bottom beside a neat and curly signature.

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

All student organisations, societies, teams, groups and dubs are henceforth disbanded.

An organisation, society, team, group or club is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students.

Permission to re-form may be sought from the High Inquisitor (Professor Umbridge).

No student organisation, society, team, group or club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor.

Any student found to have formed, or to belong to, an organisation, society, team, group or club that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-four.

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor

Harry and Ron read the notice over the heads of some anxious-looking second-years. "Does this mean they're going to shut down the Gobstones Club?" one of them asked his friend.

"I reckon you'll be OK with Gobstones," Ron said darkly, making the second-year jump. "I don't think we're going to be as lucky, though, do you?" he asked Harry as the second-years hurried away.

Harry was reading the notice through again. The happiness that had filled him since Saturday was gone. His insides were pulsing with rage. "This isn't a coincidence," he said, his hands forming fists. "She knows."

"She can't," said Ron at once.

"We should have demanded an oath," Hermione said as she came down the stairs.

"I'll bet it was Smith," Ron grumbled. "He was fighting harder than anyone else there."

"I won't accuse him until there's proof," Harry said quietly. "I've been there before, so I won't do it to someone else."

"We'll know when we see Smith next," Hermione said. "Let's just say that the reason everyone felt as if they'd signed a contract was that they had. Breaking it will ... well, I'll leave the surprise, but everyone will know, let's just leave it at that."

It was immediately apparent on entering the Great Hall that Umbridge's sign had not only appeared in Gryffindor Tower. There was a peculiar intensity about the chatter and an extra measure of movement in the Hall as people scurried up and down their tables conferring on what they had read. Harry, Ron and Hermione had barely taken their seats when Neville, Dean, Fred, George and Ginny descended upon them.

“Did you see it?”

“D'you reckon she knows?”

“What are we going to do?”

They were all looking at Harry. He glanced around to make sure there were no teachers near them.

“We're going to do it anyway of course,” he said quietly.

“Knew you'd say that,” said George, beaming and thumping Harry on the arm.

“The prefects as well?” said Fred, looking quizzically at Ron and Hermione.

“Of course,” said Hermione coolly.

“Here come Ernie and Hannah,” said Ron, looking over his shoulder. “*And* those Ravenclaw blokes and Smith ... and no one looks very much different, other than worried..”

Hermione looked alarmed. “Never mind spots, the idiots can't come over here now, it'll look really suspicious - sit down!” she mouthed to Ernie and Hannah, gesturing frantically to them to rejoin the Hufflepuff table. “Later! We'll - talk - to - you – later!”

Angelina Johnson came in and headed for the head table. “Professor Umbridge?” she asked.

“Yes, dear?” came the reply in her sickly sweet manner.

“Would I be correct in assuming that the Quidditch teams are also covered under Educational Decree Twenty-Four?”

“Yes, they are.”

“I am requesting that I be permitted to reform the Gryffindor Quidditch team. If necessary, I will submit the request in writing. May we reform the team?”

Dolores Umbridge's smile, were she a more attractive woman, would have lit up the room, rather than making some people vaguely uneasy and ill. "Five points to Gryffindor for asking so politely. You have no need to put it in writing, my dear. You have permission to restart the team. Unfortunately, that brings me to an announcement that you need to hear." She looked down the length of the room. "Mister Potter?"

Harry knew that those five points were about to be rescinded with his refusal to answer, but he was damned if he was going to answer to the name. "Mister Black," McGonagall's voice spoke up.

"Yes, Professor McGonagall?" There was no emotion in his response.

Her lips were in a tight thin line for a long moment before she said, "Please give Professor Umbridge your attention."

Umbridge looked pleased. "Thank you, Professor McGonagall. Mister Potter, I will be forced to forbid your membership on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, due to the abysmal scores you received on your History of Magic, Charms, and Defence Against the Dark Arts tests. Perhaps if you spent more time on your schoolwork and less time making up lies intended to scare the populace, you might improve your scores." She had a malicious smirk on her face.

"As you say, ma'am," he said quietly. "I should be on my way to History of Magic, then." He turned and left the suddenly silent Great Hall.

Chapter 16

The day went surprisingly quietly, but since he tended toward a silent act with all the teachers save Pettigrew, he couldn't be entirely shocked by it. It was as he was nearing dinner that night that he and the Gryffindor crew he was with met up with Draco Malfoy and his omnipresent goons, as he had expected to for some time.

"I see what your grades are like now that you don't have your mother here to lay the other teachers to get you good grades, Potter," the blonde boy sneered.

"And I see what it took to get you an improvement – your father had to buy the Minister and try again to take over the school." He paused for a moment. "Who'd he threaten this time, Draco? Or has he got your Master's whore sleeping with them all?" He stopped, calculating whether or not to say what he wanted to, then decided to go for it. "Wait a second, I'd best be more precise. That description could refer to your mother as well."

The spell that Draco fired at Harry blew a very large chunk out of the wall behind the Gryffindors, and it was as the others were drawing their wands that Professor Snape arrived. "Fighting in the halls, are we? Ten points from each Gryffindor with a wand out. Mister Malfoy, run along. Mister Potter, you will come with me immediately, because you are beginning a month of detention with me, starting immediately. You will not have weekends off, and as of this moment, your Hogsmeade privileges are revoked."

"Malfoy fires the first spell and Harry gets the detention?" Ron Weasley exclaimed.

"Obviously Mister Malfoy felt threatened by something that Mister Potter said and defended himself. Twenty points for questioning my judgement." He turned to Harry. "Move it, Mister Potter, or would you like another month added?" he roared.

Harry faced the Potions Master and stood ramrod straight. He clicked his heels together, shot his right arm upward at a forty-five degree

angle, and said, "Jawohl, mein Fuhrer!" before spinning and stalking forcefully to the Potions dungeon.

He grumbled to himself as he moved. *Figures that Snivellus was waiting for that to happen. Probably set the scenario up. "Go on, Draco. Taunt him, and I'm certain that he'll do something we can get him for."* "Yeth, Mahthter," the little Igor probably responded. He entered Snape's Potions laboratory and waited for the man to arrive.

It was when Snape reached the dungeon that Harry learned something about the man that very few others knew. He learned it when Snape grabbed him by the throat, lifted him, and slammed him hard into the stone wall. "If you ever equate me with that creature again, you'll beg me to do to you what he did to the Jews." He then let Harry down by throwing him a short distance, causing Harry to land across a table. He thought he felt something break. "Tell anyone what just happened and I guarantee that you will not survive the year, you arrogant little shite."

Harry stood shakily and faced down the professor. "Then you had best kill me now and come up with a good story. I won't back down to Umbitch and I certainly won't back down to a waste of sperm like you." He ducked out of the way of the oncoming spell and returned fire.

"I'm a master dueller, Potter. Do you truly expect to defeat me?" Snape sneered.

"A guy can hope," Harry replied as he fired off another spell, which struck the door to the storeroom.

"Watch it, you fool!" Snape yelled. "There are volatile ingredients in there!"

Moron, Harry thought to himself with a grin. *You'd think a master dueller would know better than to tell me where to aim.* He stood and fired a *Reducto* in Severus Snape's direction, followed immediately by a huge gout of fire. He then ducked behind a desk as he heard a surprisingly girlish scream, followed by a thunderous explosion, which was quickly replaced with a high-pitched squeal in his ears. This was

followed quickly by chunks of stone falling upon him, which quickly rendered him unconscious.

He awoke in the hospital wing and sighed. *So, how long before they come in and threaten me with expulsion?*

“Ah, Harry, I see that you are awake.” He looked over to see the Headmaster smiling at him. “Quite an impressive display of pyrotechnics down in the Potions laboratories. Professor Snape barely escaped with his life, as did you. What happened, might I ask?”

“Does it really matter? I had a detention, and it led to an explosion. I expect that the High Inquisitor will be along in a while to expel me.”

“Not while I am in charge of the school,” came the response. “I wish to know what truly happened.”

“Okay. Not that it'll do anyone any good.” He closed his eyes to think. “The group of us were heading to dinner when Draco Malfoy and his ever present goon squad of two got in our way. He made some comment about seeing what my grades are really like when Mum isn't screwing the other teachers, and I fired back that it takes his father buying the Minister to get him grades. I also mentioned that it was likely his master's whore sleeping with various members of the Board of Governors.” He blushed at the language he was using in front of the man.

“That's not quite all, is it, Harry?”

“No, I also clarified, since I admit to wanting to hit him as hard as he hit me, so I said that the description I'd used could refer to his mother as well. That's why there's a large chunk of wall missing – he fired some spell at me, and it missed all of us. We started to pull our wands to defend ourselves, and that's when our illustrious Potions Master came around the corner and took points from every Gryffindor with a wand drawn. Obviously we had provoked his precious Draco and he had only responded in kind.”

"I have heard a number of Muggleborn students say that they are surprised that you survived the detention. Why is that?"

"Well, he ordered me to his lab for detention – oh, by the way, the detention is for an entire month with no days off and I have had my Hogsmeade visits revoked – and he ordered me in such a way that I snapped him the Nazi salute and said 'Jawohl, mein Fuhrer'. I left, and headed down. He got to his lab, picked me up by the throat and told me that if I ever said that again, I would not survive the school year. I told him he should kill me now, because I wasn't going to back down to Umbridge or him." He coloured again. "I might have used a particularly nasty term to describe him."

Harry sighed. "I'll pack things up when I get out of here, because the High Inquisitor is not going to be happy. Besides, you need him here at the school too much." He shrugged, somewhat painfully. "And it will definitely come down to a him or me situation, if I know our Potions Master."

"I hope that you will forgive me, Harry, but I used Legilimency upon you while you were unconscious, as I did a few months ago, in order to see what had happened. Even your taunt of Mister Malfoy, while cruel, was no more cruel than his taunt to you." He frowned. "I fear that I shall be forced to release Severus from our employ, since he has gone far beyond the pale. I can see the bruises on your throat. Did he do that with only one arm?"

"I think so," Harry said. "Why now, sir? Last year, he tried to kill me with the *Sectumsempra* spell, but you kept him on as a teacher, and even managed to convince Madam Pomfrey to stay. Why is he being released now?"

"Because I am realising the mistake that I made last year. I had thought that he could finally release his dislike of you and work with us against Voldemort, but I fear that I shall need to find another place for him outside of the school." He shook his head. "I am sorry for the treatment you have received over the years from him."

"You aren't at fault for his actions, sir."

“But I am at fault for keeping him here, so for that I apologise.” He looked at Harry for a moment before continuing. “May I ask the reason for the ... how do you youngsters say it ... 'bad blood' between yourself and Minerva? Professor McGonagall, that is.”

Harry inhaled deeply and then puffed out his cheeks before exhaling slowly. “You'll probably be unhappy with me, and even tell me that I'm being childish. It started on our first day of classes. Our 'High Inquisitor' threw me out of class because I wouldn't back down about Voldemort. I was sent to the Professor, who told me to keep my head down and not make waves. Keep my temper. If I had to lie to Umbridge to stay safe, then do so.” He took another breath. “I was annoyed enough about that, but when the inspections started happening, and I saw her getting angry at Umbridge in class, I ... sir, something like that bothers me. That's hypocrisy in my eyes. She can get angry about injustice and such, but I'm too young to be allowed to? Hide, rather than stand up for the truth? That's not the teaching I'd expect from a Gryffindor, let alone the Head of the House! She is letting things like this happen!” He held up his right hand and thrust it in the Headmaster's face.

Albus Dumbledore repositioned his glasses and carefully took Harry's hand. His mouth almost immediately set tightly into a grim sharp line. “Who has done this to you, Harry?”

“It was my punishment for saying that Voldemort is back. When she tells you that the students are 'doing lines', this is what she means. This is roughly two weeks worth of writing 'I must not tell lies'. She uses what I've been calling a Blood Quill.”

The scowl on Dumbledore's face deepened. “They are specifically called Contract Quills, because that is the only legitimate use for them. You use one when it is necessary to invoke blood magic for a contract. Writing lines is not a ... Harry, I want you to tell me a bald-faced lie.”

Harry scowled at him. “You *want* me to lie to you?”

“Yes. I suspect something worrisome. Tell me something both you and I will know is false on the very face of the statement.”

"All right," said Harry. "I love D ... " His face contorted painfully. "I love ... I ... love " Finally, he was forced to admit defeat.

"What were you going to say?" Albus asked him.

"My intended statement was 'I love Draco Malfoy', but I couldn't ... wait, how did I say it this time?"

"My fear is correct. By writing those lines, she has forced you into a contract wherein you may not lie. Stretching the truth is possible, as is avoiding it, but outright lying is now impossible for you. When I asked you what you wished to say, you were capable of telling me the thought you had tried to say before, no matter it's truthfulness."

"Okay, so I cannot truthfully express positive feelings for Draco, but I can say that I love Hermione and hope that she works everything out in such a way that it allows us to be together again." He scowled. "I love Hermione, Ginny, Angelina, Sie ... S ... well, I can't say that I feel *that* way about sis, thank Merlin, but ... well, I'm bothered. I must be experiencing teenaged lust feelings and mistaking them for love. I can't love all those girls the same."

"No, you don't love them the same way. However, it is possible to love them each for themselves."

"Still, if I'm honest with myself, it can't be real love. I'm only fifteen."

"And why would your age be a hindrance to understanding love?"

"Lack of experience, sir. I mistook what I felt for Fleur to be love."

"Do you know otherwise now?" the Headmaster asked.

"Well, she's not here right now, and I haven't heard from her since they left to return to France," replied Harry.

"I did not ask about her feelings, I asked about yours."

"It hurts, sir. I really liked being around her, and the ... well, getting together as closely as we did was enjoyable." Harry's face and ears were a brilliant red.

"Yes, I remember how much fun sex and lovemaking can be, Harry," Albus said with a twinkle. His response deepened Harry's blush considerably. "You still have strong feelings for her, and this causes what you feel to be a betrayal to hurt you emotionally."

"She won't write, and she won't answer any of my letters, even to tell me to bugger off, begging your pardon, sir. Even her family wants nothing to do with me. None of my letters are answered."

"I would not have expected that of Jean and Aimee," Dumbledore mused. "Do I have your permission to contact them and make some inquiries?"

"Certainly! If you can figure out whether or not it's something I did that I can apologise for, I'd appreciate it," said Harry rather gratefully.

"I will endeavour to learn what I can." The headmaster sighed. "I would recommend staying in here as long as possible, since I know that you will be forced to face Professor Umbridge when you exit. I also fear that my sacking of Severus may well be my final act as Headmaster. I can only hope that it will stick, as the young say."

"What is it that you've said? 'It does not do to dwell on dreams'?" Harry asked with a smile, which drew a chuckle from the Headmaster. They talked for a while more on subjects less vital to the school's well-being for a while, and eventually he made way for other well wishers.

He lay in bed quietly for a time after the Headmaster left. Dobby appeared with his meal, obviously quite happy that Harry was once again amongst the living and conscious. "Dobby was so worried about you!" squeaked the house elf.

"I'm fine, Dobby. Not that much of the debris hit me. I've had worse Quidditch injuries."

"Dobby still worries about Harry Po ... Dobby is sorry. Dobby worries about Harry Black." Dobby looked as if he wanted to twist his ears, but was not doing so. Yet. "Is there anything Dobby can do to help Harry Black?"

He was about to say no when he suddenly remembered that they needed a place to gather for the meetings. "If you could look around for a place where a largish group of us could meet to train, that Madam Umbridge couldn't find, well – I'd be very happy."

Dobby began to bounce and squeak happily. "Dobby knows just the place! Dobby will tell Harry Black just where it is!" He bounced around the room for a moment, literally bouncing off the wall once.

"Dobby!" Harry finally managed to say through his laughter. "Please, calm down!"

Dobby stopped and came slinking over. "Dobby is sorry, Harry Black."

"You can be happy, Dobby. I was just afraid you might hurt yourself with the bouncing."

"Dobby would not be hurt, Harry Black."

"If you say so." He smiled widely at the house elf. "Where is this perfect room?"

"Does Harry Black know where the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy is, on the seventh floor?" Harry nodded. "If Harry Black walks back and forth three times before that picture, thinking about the type of room Harry Black needs, it will become what Harry Black needs. Mister Filch sir uses it for extra cleaning supplies. Headmaster -"

"- he used it once when he needed a chamberpot, didn't he?" Harry asked, suddenly connecting a comment he remembered from an odd conversation he'd had with the man once.

"Yes! The room will become what Harry Black needs! It will be perfect for practising!"

Harry smiled widely. "Dobby, you may well have saved us all. Thank you. Is there something that I can do for you in thanks?"

The little house elf's eyes widened even farther than usual. "Harry Black offers to do something for Dobby as a thank you? Dobby is the most blessed house elf in all the world! Your wish is more than

enough!" Dobby looked as if he wanted to hug Harry, but made himself happy with taking Harry's hand and crying against it for a moment. "Thank you, Harry Black. Thank you." Before Harry could say anything, the house elf had popped away.

It was Friday evening when he was finally released, having missed the remainder of the school week. The others had brought him his homework, and he had done what he was capable of doing while still abed, although the very concept of working while injured seemed somehow unfair to him. He had been thankful for the Defence book, however, since he seemed to be dealing with insomnia while in the hospital wing, and that book was a sure cure for that.

There was a small party waiting for him when he reached Gryffindor Tower, and he discovered that it was because Severus Snape had in fact been released from employment at Hogwarts while Harry had been in the infirmary.

"Has he returned from St. Mungo's yet to get his stuff?" Harry asked. "He was a heck of a lot closer to the explosion than I was – I had a desk between me and the kaboom." He laughed suddenly. "Knowing that he survived makes it easier to laugh about the incredibly high pitched scream that he let out with when I fired that fireball into the storage room. Sounded like Sienna or Ginny when they were about four or five years old. I, of course, was a *far* more mature five or six." He grinned widely at the two girls, who laughed, realising that he'd included himself in the ridicule, which paradoxically lessened any sting it might have had.

"I don't look forward to the response, though," Dean said finally. "I don't think that Umbridge is going to take kindly to Albus making any decisions about hiring and firing without first consulting her."

"You're probably right," said Harry. "Even the Headmaster thinks that this might be the last major decision he makes as Headmaster this year. He's just hoping that it sticks."

There was some general agreement, and nothing of any real consequence was said. The party broke up and people began drifting

to bed, leaving just a handful behind. Finally, Parvati spoke up. "Harry, now that everyone is gone except us, I have a question for you. I can't really think of a kinder way to ask this: In previous years, you'd have gone up one side of Umbridge and down the other, no questions asked, no quarter asked or given. Why are you accepting the treatment she's giving you?"

"Why am I bending over and taking it, is that what you're asking?" She blushed deeply, but nodded. "I think I'm growing up. When I was younger, I could get away with acting childish and throwing a hissy fit. If I do that now, they expel me and torture me by coming after Sienna and James, Ron and Ginny, Hermione, you, the Quidditch girls, and a number of others. There are those who know that it would bother me to be unable to do anything by not being here. So I hold my tongue and be more adult by not doing anything when I'd really like to be unloading quite a bit of anger. Make no mistake, I have a very strong revenge planned for when this situation is over. I won't say more, because I wouldn't put it past her to plant listening devices in the common room."

"What about McGonagall? Isn't that at odds with what you just said?"

"Not really. You'll note that there are certain things that I simply won't stand for. Being called Potter, for example – I refuse to answer to it. Our old Defence teacher spent years informing me that I wasn't family. Now, it may have been due to that curse damage he took years ago, back about the time Mum got pregnant with me, but I still can't forget that all the time that I wanted him to love me and care for me as his son, I was considered nothing but a parasite. As for McGonagall, look at what she does in regards to Umbridge, and then listen to what she tells you. She tells us, or at least me, to lay low – not to catch the woman's attention – and then she goes and gets noticeably angry with the woman herself. It's quite obvious that the situation is that anything that Umbridge wants here at the school, Fudge will rubber stamp for her." At the blank looks he received, he shrugged. "Muggle saying. It means that he'll pretty much agree without even checking. So McGonagall is in as much danger as we are. But she can get angry while we're wrong if we do?"

“Black is your legal name, isn't it?” Hermione asked. When Harry nodded, she said, “Maybe someone needs to get some sort of legal injunction or something to remind her that it is actually a legal name change. She seems so hot and bothered over what is legal and what isn't.”

“I doubt that Contract Quills are legal for the usage she puts them to. The Headmaster discovered that by doing what I've been doing, I've effectively signed a contract. I can no longer flat out lie to anyone because of those lines. We'll never be able to prove it to her, however. She can always say that the insane always believe that what they're saying is true. This is a case for waiting. On way or another, she will get hers. I'll see to it.”

The next day, he grabbed Ron and Hermione and headed for the seventh floor. They hurried along the corridor to the place Dobby had described to Harry, a stretch of blank wall opposite an enormous tapestry depicting Barnabas the Barmy's foolish attempt to train trolls for the ballet.

“OK,” said Harry quietly, while a moth-eaten troll paused in his relentless clubbing of the would-be ballet teacher to watch them. “Dobby said to walk past this bit of wall – well, he said the tapestry, to be honest – three times, concentrating hard on what we need.”

They did so, turning sharply at the window just beyond the blank stretch of wall, then at the man-sized vase on its other side. Ron had screwed up his eyes in concentration; Hermione was whispering something under her breath; Harry's fists were clenched as he stared ahead of him.

We need somewhere to learn to fight ... he thought. Just give us a place to practise ... somewhere they can't find us ...

“Harry!” said Hermione sharply, as they wheeled around after their third walk past.

A highly polished door had appeared in the wall. Ron was staring at it, looking slightly wary. Harry reached out, seized the brass handle, pulled open the door and led the way into a spacious room lit with flickering torches like those that illuminated the dungeons eight floors

below. The walls were lined with wooden bookcases and instead of chairs there were large silk cushions on the floor. A set of shelves at the far end of the room carried a range of instruments such as Sneakoscopes, Secrecy Sensors and a large, cracked Foe-Glass. "These will be good when we're practising Stunning," said Ron enthusiastically, prodding one of the cushions with his foot.

"And just look at these books!" said Hermione excitedly, running a finger along the spines of the large leather-bound tomes. "*A Compendium of Common Curses and their Counter-Actions ... The Dark Arts Outsmarted ... Self-Defensive Spellwork ...* wow ..." She looked around at Harry, her face glowing, and he saw that the presence of hundreds of books had finally convinced Hermione that what they were doing was right. "Harry, this is wonderful, there's everything we need here!" And without further ado she slid *Jinxes for the Jinxed* from its shelf, sank on to the nearest cushion and began to read.

Harry watched her read for a long moment and finally said to Ron, "I think we'd best leave her alone." Ron took a look at the grin on Harry's face and nodded. The two of them checked out the room further.

The room seemed perfect for their needs, from what Harry could see. He contemplated testing spell strength at some point, and a wall shimmered and stretched away from him. A target appeared on the wall when it came back to solidity. Impressed, he fired a weak Stunner at the target, which made a ringing noise when he struck it, and the number '15' appeared above it. "That's not that powerful," Hermione said from beside him, which made him jump. "That's a testing target. They measure spell strength in percentages."

"Compared to who?" Ron asked. "Merlin? We're all wimps compared to him. Who knows how powerful the Founders were? Dumbledore?"

"Actually, the scale is based off Paracelsus," Hermione said, falling into lecture mode. "He was famous, but considered to be the peak of power that a normal wizard or witch could reach. That scale is still used today, and only three that I know of have ever broken one

hundred percent on that scale. Grindelwald, Albus Dumbledore, and Tom Riddle.”

“Let's see how you do,” Harry said. “All three of us will throw spells as we would in a duel.” He grinned. “Pretend the target is Draco Malfoy.” As he said it, an overlay of the blond Slytherin's face appeared on the target.

Ron stepped forward and fired off a bright red beam at the target. It released a loud chime, and '87' appeared above it. He turned to find Hermione staring at him in shock. “Please, don't point out how badly I just did, Hermione. I know that I'm -”

“Ron,” she interrupted. “Most people your age – you're fifteen, right? - most your age manage upper forties to lower fifties, because they've not reached their magical maturity yet. There's a reason that seventeen is an important age for a witch or wizard. For you to manage an eighty-seven – Ron, I'll bet that if your father or two oldest brothers were in here and firing, they'd likely be matching your score, or maybe beating it by no more than a few points. They've hit their maturity, Ron. You're still growing. You're likely the most powerful member of your family.”

“Me?” he asked, flabbergasted.

“Ron, professional duellists hit scores like yours. Professional curse breakers. Dragon wranglers. People who need power behind their shots. Usually that tends to lead to power over subtlety, but *you're still growing, Ron*. And you can be plenty subtle when you need to. Can you imagine what you'll score at seventeen?”

He stood stock still, staring at the target. Finally, he shook his head. “How about you, then?” he said.

Hermione looked at the target and flicked her wand, changing the face to Pansy Parkinson's. A moment later, a red beam impacted the target, causing the number '83' to appear above the target. She stepped back in shock, and her wand fell from her fingertips. “How ... I can see Ron being that powerful, but ... I'm not ... I'm just smart, not a powerhouse -”

Harry walked over to her and handed her the wand he'd Summoned to himself. "Having trouble believing that you could be just as special as Ron?" He gave her a quick hug. "So you're smart *and* powerful." He wiggled his eyebrows at her when she turned to look at him. "Sexy combination," he said, giving her a cheesy grin and continuing to wiggle his eyebrows suggestively. She laughed and gave him a hug.

"Guess it's my turn?" he said when she let him go. He cleared the picture away and took aim at the target. Taking a deep breath, he fired at the target.

113.

He stared at it for a second, and fired again.

115.

He stepped backwards and tripped over one of the cushions, falling flat onto his back on the other cushions. "Son of a bi ... great Merlin's ghost! Over a hundred without really trying? What does that mean?"

Hermione looked at him with a little awe, and a little annoyance. "It means that someday we'll be talking about how we remember you back before your name went up there next to Dumbledore and Merlin as powerful people on the Light side."

"I'm hoping you guys will be there with me, you know. I may have the power, but you guys give me the drive to keep going. When I finally kill that bastard once and for all, it'll be because you guys, the people I love, are right there next to me, if only in spirit."

"Can't you leave it ..." Hermione began, then thought better of herself. "No, you wouldn't be the Harry that I know and lo ... care for if you left it for someone else. Never mind."

"You can say that you love me, Hermione. I love Ron. As a friend. God forbid I'm ever scarred with the sight of him naked," he finished with a laugh, avoiding the swat Ron aimed at him. The two boys were suddenly on the cushions, rolling around wrestling as only two

teenaged boys can. They finally broke when their laughter took their strength away.

Hermione stood with her arms crossed, tapping her foot in annoyance, but the grin on her face gave away her true feelings. "Boys!" she laughed.

"Well, we need to find our members and let them know to come here tonight. What, eight o'clock, you figure, or should we make it earlier?"

"Let's go with eight for now," Ron said. "If it looks like we're going to need more time, then we make sure the next one is scheduled earlier." Hermione nodded her agreement.

Harry sat in the room with the Gryffindors before eight o'clock, waiting for the others from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff to show up. They were pestering him for answers on how he'd found the room, but he decided to hold off telling anyone in case the others wanted to know. There was a gentle knock on the door, and the first of the others had arrived. By the time eight o'clock arrived, every cushion was occupied. Harry moved across to the door and turned the key protruding from the lock; it clicked in a satisfyingly loud way and everybody fell silent, looking at him.

"Well," said Harry, slightly nervous. "This is the place we've found for practice sessions, and you've – er – obviously found it OK."

"It's fantastic!" said Cho, and several people murmured their agreement. "How'd you find it?"

"It's bizarre," said Fred, frowning around at it. "We once hid from Filch in here, remember, George? But it was just a broom cupboard then."

"Hey, Harry, what's this stuff?" asked Dean from the rear of the room, indicating the Sneakoscopes and the Foe-Glass.

"Dark detectors," said Harry, stepping between the cushions to reach them. "Basically they all show when Dark wizards or enemies are around, but you don't want to rely on them too much, they can be

fooled.” He gazed for a moment into the cracked Foe-Glass; shadowy figures were moving around inside it, though none was recognisable. He turned his back on it. “As for how I found it, thank a house elf for that. Dobby is a great help.”

He scowled for a moment. “Well, I’ve been thinking about the sort of stuff we ought to do first and …” He noticed a raised hand. “What, Hermione?”

“I think we ought to elect a leader,” said Hermione.

“Harry’s leader,” said Cho at once, looking at Hermione as though she were mad.

“Yes, but I think we ought to vote on it properly,” said Hermione, unperturbed. “It makes it formal and it gives him authority. So – everyone who thinks Harry ought to be our leader?”

Everybody put up their hand, even Zacharias Smith, though he did it very half-heartedly.

“Right, thanks,” said Harry, who could feel his face burning. “And – *what*, Hermione?”

“I also think we ought to have a name,” she said brightly, her hand still in the air. “It would promote a feeling of team spirit and unity, don’t you think?”

“Can we be the Anti-Umbridge League?” said Angelina hopefully.

“Or the Ministry of Magic are Morons Group?” suggested Fred.

“I was thinking,” said Hermione, frowning at Fred, “more of a name that didn’t tell everyone what we were up to, so we can refer to it safely outside meetings.”

“The Practice Club?” said Cho. “PC for short, so nobody knows what we’re talking about?”

“Yeah, PC is good,” said Ginny. “Only let’s make it stand for Potter’s Commandos, because that’s the Ministry’s worst fear, isn’t it? That

Dumbledore will set up an army and take over the Ministry, and that he'll use students, since he's Headmaster?"

There was a good deal of appreciative murmuring and laughter at this.

"I can't say I'm happy about it," Harry said, "given that it perpetuates the tendency to call me Potter, but the arrogance involved in insisting on Black's Commandos is monumental. Besides, we're only able to do this because Professor Potter gave me his notes, so we can call it that in his honour."

"All in favour of the PC?" said Hermione bossily, kneeling up on her cushion to count. "That's a majority – motion passed!"

She pinned the piece of parchment with all of their signatures on it on to the wall and wrote across the top in large letters:

POTTER'S COMMANDOS

"Right," said Harry, when she had sat down again, "shall we get practising then? I was thinking, the first thing we should do is *Expelliarmus*, you know, the Disarming Charm. I know it's pretty basic but I've found it really useful -"

"Oh, *please*," said Zacharias Smith, rolling his eyes and folding his arms. "I don't think *Expelliarmus* is exactly going to help us against You-Know-Who, do you?"

"I've used it against him," said Harry quietly. "It saved my life in May." Smith opened his mouth stupidly. The rest of the room was very quiet. "But if you think it's beneath you, you can leave," Harry said. Smith did not move. Nor did anybody else. "OK," said Harry, his mouth slightly drier than usual with all these eyes upon him, "I reckon we should all divide into pairs and practise."

It felt very odd to be issuing instructions, but not nearly as odd as seeing them followed. Everybody got to their feet at once and divided up. Neville was left sans partner. "You can practise with me," Harry told him. "Right – on the count of three, then – one, two, three -"

The room was suddenly full of shouts of *Expelliarmus*. Wands flew in all directions; missed spells hit books on shelves and sent them flying into the air. Harry was too quick for Neville, whose wand went spinning out of his hand, hit the ceiling in a shower of sparks and landed with a clatter on top of a bookshelf, from which Harry retrieved it with a Summoning Charm. Glancing around, he thought he had been right to suggest they practise the basics first; there was a lot of shoddy spellwork going on; many people were not succeeding in Disarming their opponents at all, but merely causing them to jump backwards a few paces or wince as their feeble spell whooshed over them.

Harry passed Neville off to Ron and Hermione and moved off into the middle of the room. Something very odd was happening to Zacharias Smith. Every time he opened his mouth to disarm Anthony Goldstein, his own wand would fly out of his hand, yet Anthony did not seem to be making a sound. Harry did not have to look far to solve the mystery: Fred and George were several feet from Smith and taking it in turns to point their wands at his back.

"Sorry, Harry," said George hastily, when Harry caught his eye. "Couldn't resist."

Harry walked around the other pairs, trying to correct those who were doing the spell wrong. Ginny was teamed with Michael Corner; she was doing very well, whereas Michael was either very bad or unwilling to jinx her. Ernie Macmillan was flourishing his wand unnecessarily, giving his partner time to get in under his guard; the Creevey brothers were enthusiastic but erratic and mainly responsible for all the books leaping off the shelves around them; Luna Lovegood was similarly patchy, occasionally sending Justin Finch-Fletchley's wand spinning out of his hand, at other times merely causing his hair to stand on end. "OK, stop!" Harry shouted. "Stop! *STOP!*" *I need a whistle*, he thought, and immediately spotted one lying on top of the nearest row of books. He caught it up and blew hard. Everyone lowered their wands. "That wasn't bad," said Harry, "but there's definite room for improvement." Zacharias Smith glared at him. "Let's try again."

He moved off around the room again, stopping here and there to make suggestions. Slowly, the general performance improved. He avoided going near Cho and her friend for a while, but after walking twice around every other pair in the room felt he could not ignore them any longer. He was a little uncertain about being around her. He was happy with the other girls, but Cho was certainly giving signals that she might like to become part of that group. He wasn't sure what to do about that.

"Oh no," said Cho rather wildly as he approached. "*Expelliarmious!* I mean, *Expellimellius* – oh, sorry, Marietta!" Her curly-haired friend's sleeve had caught fire; Marietta extinguished it with her own wand and glared at Harry as though it was his fault. "You made me nervous, I was doing all right before then!" Cho told Harry ruefully.

"That was quite good," Harry said, but when she raised her eyebrows he said, "Well, assuming you wanted to light her sleeve on fire, that is, but I know you can do it properly, I was watching from over there."

She laughed. Her friend Marietta looked at them rather sourly and turned away. "Don't mind her," Cho muttered. "She doesn't really want to be here but I made her come with me. Her parents have forbidden her to do anything that might upset Umbridge. You see - her mum works for the Ministry."

"What about your parents?" asked Harry.

"Well, they've forbidden me to get on the wrong side of Umbridge, too," said Cho, drawing herself up proudly. "But if they think I'm not going to fight You-Know-Who after what happened to Cedric and his family, and you -" She stopped, suddenly blushing deeply.

"Well, my dad is very supportive of any anti-Ministry action!" said Luna Lovegood proudly from just behind Harry; evidently she had been eavesdropping on his conversation while Justin Finch-Fletchley attempted to disentangle himself from the robes that had flown up over his head. "He's always saying he'd believe anything of Fudge; I mean, the number of goblins Fudge has had assassinated! And of course he uses the Department of Mysteries to develop terrible poisons, which he secretly feeds to anybody who disagrees with him. And then there's his Umgubular Slashkilter -"

"Don't ask," Harry muttered to Cho as she opened her mouth, looking puzzled. She giggled.

"Hey, Harry," Hermione called from the other end of the room, "have you checked the time?"

He looked down at his watch and was shocked to see it was already ten past nine, which meant they needed to get back to their common rooms immediately or risk being caught and punished by Filch for being out of bounds. He blew his whistle; everybody stopped shouting "*Expelliarmus*" and the last couple of wands clattered to the floor.

"Well, that was pretty good," said Harry, "but we've overrun, we'd better leave it here. Same time, same place next week?"

"Sooner!" said Dean Thomas eagerly and many people nodded in agreement.

Angelina, however, said quickly "The Quidditch season's about to start, we need team practices too, especially since Umbridge unfairly screwed over our Seeker!"

"Let's say next Wednesday night, then," interjected Harry quickly, before a conversation could get started about Umbridge's fouls against the students, "we can decide on additional meetings then. Come on, we'd better get going."

He pulled out the Marauder's Map again and checked it carefully for signs of teachers on the seventh floor. He let them all leave in threes and fours, watching their tiny dots anxiously to see that they returned safely to their dormitories: the Hufflepuffs to the basement corridor that also led to the kitchens; the Ravenclaws to a tower on the west side of the castle, and the Gryffindors along the corridor to the Fat Lady's portrait.

"That was really, really good, Harry," said Hermione, when finally it was just her, Harry and Ron who were left.

"Yeah, it was!" said Ron enthusiastically, as they slipped out of the door and watched it melt back into stone behind them. "Did you see me disarm Hermione, Harry?"

"Only once," said Hermione, stung. "I got you loads more than you got me -"

"I did not only get you once, I got you at least three times -"

Harry rubbed his eyes. "Please, guys. I have a headache from doing this. I chose *Expelliarmus* because it was the easiest way to see how the group could handle things, but I'm going to have to see about following Professor Potter's notes. Could you please leave the foreplay for another time?" He walked to the entrance to the Tower, not noticing that they had stopped behind him at that comment. They followed him shortly thereafter.

"What do you mean 'foreplay'?" Hermione asked, worried.

"Pretty much everyone in Gryffindor Tower looks at your arguing as foreplay. Given the snogging you two were doing last year, they figured it was just the warm-up before the broom cupboard," Harry replied, rubbing his temples.

"Do you think that we're ... well, I said that I wasn't -" said Hermione.

Harry's eyes opened. "Oh, I'm sorry Hermione!" he said. "I never meant to say that you were ... it's just something that slipped out." He met her eyes and said, "I know that you are a woman of your word, and I am not calling that word into question. And remember what I told you about my ability to lie."

She relaxed. "Thank you, Harry. I am just so worried that -"

"You need to relax, Hermione," said Ron. "Go study or something. Paradoxically, that seems to relax you, while it just stresses Harry and me out." He paused. "And I even used 'paradoxically' correctly – what have you done to me, woman?" he finished melodramatically, throwing the back of his hand to his forehead.

"You hussy," said Ginny in the same tone that Ron had used. "He never uses words like that, let alone correctly. Stop working your feminine wiles upon him and return him to his former state of cluelessness!"

"Oi! Watch it, munchkin!" Ron yelled with a laugh. "If you're not careful, I'll tell Neville about the time you were running around the yard without a shirt, with Harry in hot pursuit!" Neville's eyebrows made a concerted effort to disappear under his hairline.

"Oi, Ron!" Harry yelled. "Should I tell Nev that you were chasing her too?"

"She *is* a Weasley, after all," Fred yelled from across the room.

"We're irresistible, after all," chimed George.

"I was also four years old, remember?" Ginny replied, face flaming.

Think we could get a replay of that, Gin?" Harry asked, wiggling his eyebrows. "Replace Ron with Neville, of course. I'd gladly remain in the pursuit, though." he looked over at Neville and chuckled. "I think Nev likes the idea." Neville was a brilliant red colour, and trying very hard not to look at Ginny at the moment. She walked over to Neville and hugged him, whispering in his ear. Whatever she said made his eyes widen, and he blushed even harder.

Harry stopped rubbing his temples. "The headache is gone. I needed that laugh. Thanks, guys." He rose and headed upstairs. "I think I'm going to head off to bed now."

The days that followed were good to Harry. He felt as though he were carrying some kind of talisman inside his chest, a glowing secret that supported him through Umbridge's classes and even made it possible for him to smile blandly as he looked into her horrible bulging eyes. He and the DA were resisting her under her very nose, doing the very thing she and the Ministry most feared, and whenever he was supposed to be reading Wilbert Slinkhard's book during her lessons he dwelled instead on satisfying memories of their most recent

meetings, remembering how Neville had successfully disarmed Hermione, how Colin Creevey had mastered the Impediment Jinx after three meetings' hard effort, how Parvati Patil had produced such a good *Reductor* Curse that she had reduced the table carrying all the Sneakoscopes to dust.

He was finding it almost impossible to fix a regular night of the week for the DA meetings, as they had to accommodate three separate team's Quidditch practices, which were often rearranged due to bad weather conditions; but Harry was not sorry about this; he had a feeling that it was probably better to keep the timing of their meetings unpredictable. If anyone was watching them, it would be hard to make out a pattern.

Hermione soon devised a very clever method of communicating the time and date of the next meeting to all the members in case they needed to change it at short notice, because it would look suspicious if people from different Houses were seen crossing the Great Hall to talk to each other too often. She gave each of the members of the DA a fake Galleon (Ron became very excited when he first saw the basket and was convinced she was actually giving out gold).

"You see the numerals around the edge of the coins?" Hermione said, holding one up for examination at the end of their fourth meeting. The coin gleamed fat and yellow in the light from the torches. "On real Galleons that's just a serial number referring to the goblin who cast the coin. On these fake coins, though, the numbers will change to reflect the time and date of the next meeting. The coins will grow hot when the date changes, so if you're carrying them in a pocket you'll be able to feel them. We take one each, and when Harry sets the date of the next meeting he'll change the numbers on his coin, and because I've put a Protean Charm on them, they'll all change to mimic his."

A blank silence greeted Hermione's words. She looked around at all the faces upturned to her, rather disconcerted. "Well – I *thought* it was a good idea," she said uncertainly, "I mean, even if Umbridge asked us to turn out our pockets, there's nothing fishy about carrying a Galleon, is there? But ... well, if you don't want to use them -"

"You can do a Protean Charm?" said Terry Boot.

"Yes," said Hermione.

"But that's ... that's NEWT standard, that is," he said weakly.

"Oh," said Hermione, trying to look modest. "Oh ... well ... yes, I suppose it is."

"How come you're not in Ravenclaw?" he demanded, staring at Hermione with something close to wonder. "With brains like yours?"

"Well, the Sorting Hat did seriously consider putting me in Ravenclaw during my Sorting," said Hermione brightly, "but it decided on Gryffindor in the end. So, does that mean we're using the Galleons?"

"Besides," Ron said brightly, "Gryffindor needs a higher percentage of sexy girls to get the rest of the school to pay attention to us. You Ravenclaws get the brains and beauty, and Hufflepuffs are thought of as *the* people to go to in a crisis, plus they get girls like Susan and Hannah. We Gryffs are thought of as brave. Not smart, brave. So we need the pretty girls to make people pay attention to us." He grinned widely at the end.

There was a murmur of assent and plenty of laughter, which had been his intention. Everybody moved forward to collect one of the fake Galleons from the basket. Harry looked sideways at Hermione, who was blushing furiously from Ron's praise.

"You know what these remind me of?"

"No, what's that?"

"The Death Eaters' scars. Voldemort touches one of them, and all their scars burn, and they know they've got to join him."

"Well ... yes," said Hermione quietly, "that is where I got the idea, but you'll notice I decided to engrave the date on bits of metal rather than on our members' skin." She developed a somewhat nauseated look on her face.

"Yeah ... I definitely prefer your way," said Harry with his trademark lopsided grin. He slipped his Galleon into his pocket. "I suppose the only real danger with these is that we might accidentally spend them."

"Not likely," she replied, the nauseated look making way for a wicked grin. "I put an Aversion Charm on them, keyed to the thought of spending it. Basically, you literally will not want to spend this Galleon."

"Smart thinking. Then again, you were almost in Ravenclaw." He snorted. "I think you gave Boot a stiffie when he realised how smart you are," he finished in a whisper.

"Harry!" she squeaked in embarrassment, her furious blush returning.

October extinguished itself in a rush of howling winds and driving rain and November arrived, cold as frozen iron, with hard frosts every morning and icy draughts that bit at exposed hands and faces. The skies and the ceiling of the Great Hall turned a pale, pearly grey, the mountains around Hogwarts were snowcapped, and the temperature in the castle dropped so low that many students wore their thick protective dragon skin gloves in the corridors between lessons.

The morning of the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin dawned cold and clear, with no sign of incipient storms. The Slytherins had been doing their best to unnerve the Gryffindors, considering that they had been forced to train Ginny to play Seeker. She was using Harry's Nimbus, as he had promised her.

The game was fast and furious, and Malfoy was incensed when Ginny caught the Snitch out from under him, despite his faster broom. The Chasers on the Slytherin team hadn't done any better, only managing three goals to Gryffindor's ten.

It was as Ginny was making a victory lap that Harry watched Crabbe line up a shot and blast a Bludger into Ginny's back from about twenty feet away. Madam Hooch's whistle screeched into the eruption of noise from the stands at the open foul (far too much of it was loud cheers from the Slytherin stands), and she called Crabbe

down to the turf. Ginny lay on the ground a distance away, and he and Neville were somehow on the ground and running for her.

When they reached her, she was laying on her back, breathing hard, but seeming okay. It was as they were checking her out that they heard a familiar drawl. "She'd best get used to that position. A little bird tells me that her father's position at the Ministry is very precarious, and if he loses his job, the only way they'll be able to make money is if she sells it, rather than giving it away for free the way that she does now."

They turned to face him, anger evident in their eyes. "I'm surprised, given the state of their house, that they haven't been doing more for money. The little Weasel would bring in a pretty penny on the street, I'm sure. Being a pureblood improves the price, don't you know?"

"You'd know, wouldn't you?" Harry snarled. "Mummy and Daddy sell you on the streets during the summers, don't they? It's the only way that you'd understand the economics of the situation. Besides, it's the only way anyone shows any affection to you. Of course, given that you're only worth two Knuts, I'd imagine that you spend a lot of time selling it to keep your family in the manner to which they're accustomed."

"Why you -" Draco screamed as he whipped out his wand. Harry's foot came up and kicked Draco's hand, followed immediately by spinning and punching Draco in the stomach.

"Let's get you to Madam Pomfrey," Harry said to Ginny, helping her to her feet, then stooping to pick up the broom. He turned to find himself staring at Madam Hooch.

"I'll get her to Madam Pomfrey. I want you to head straight to your Head of House's office. Shameful, attacking a fellow student!"

Harry stalked up the lawn as he heard Fred and George begin to lay into the woman who was their flying teacher and referee. As he entered the hallway that housed Professor McGonagall's office, he found himself joined by Fred and George. "We're not supposed to mouth off to a teacher," said Fred in a mocking tone.

"Especially when she's wrong," added George in the same tone.

They had barely reached the door of Professor McGonagall's office when she came marching along the corridor behind them. She was wearing a Gryffindor scarf, but tore it from her throat with shaking hands as she strode towards them, looking livid.

"In!" she said furiously, pointing to the door. Harry and George entered. She strode around behind her desk and faced them, quivering with rage as she threw the Gryffindor scarf aside on to the floor.

"*Well?*" she said. "I have never seen such a disgraceful exhibition. Explain yourselves!"

"I think it's safe to say that Malfoy provoked that," said Harry stiffly.

"Provoked you?" shouted Professor McGonagall, slamming a fist on to her desk so that her tartan tin slid sideways off it and burst open, littering the floor with Ginger Newts. "He'd just lost, hadn't he? Of course he wanted to provoke you! But what on earth he can have said that justified what you -"

"He drew a bleeding wand on Harry!" George bellowed. "I think Harry was justified in protecting himself!"

"You thought wrong," she said. "Violence is not the answer to these situations." She leaned forward on the desk and said menacingly, "Now, you three had better listen closely. I do not care what provocation Malfoy offered you, your behaviour was disgusting and I am giving each of you a week's worth of detentions! Do not look at me like that, Black, you deserve it! And if you ever -"

"How dare you!" Harry exploded. "You know Malfoy as well as I do, and there is no way he was going to cast a Tickling Hex! You're telling me I was supposed to stand there and let him hit me with the spell of his choice? What kind of a Gryffindor are you?"

Minerva McGonagall inhaled deeply and drew herself to her full height. "How *dare* you speak to me in that manner! How *dare* you call

my integrity into question! Make that a month of detentions with me, Mister Black.”

Harry looked at her coldly. “Are there rules on whether or not a student can be Sorted again?” he asked calmly.

“No, Mister Black, you may not leave the House of Gryffindor in order to escape your punishments. You are stuck with your Sorting.”

“Pity. Gryffindor used to be the house of courage and fairness. Now it's the house of cowards.”

Her eyes flashed, but she said nothing.

“Hem-hem,” sounded a familiar voice from the doorway. “I see that I arrived at a perfect moment.”

“Yes?” asked McGonagall with a barely contained fury.

“I think that Potter deserves rather more than detentions,” said Umbridge, smiling broadly.

Professor McGonagall's eyes flew open. “But unfortunately” she said, with an attempt at a reciprocal smile that made her look as though she had lockjaw, “it is what I think that counts, as they are in my House, Dolores.”

“Well, *actually*, Minerva,” simpered Professor Umbridge, “I think you'll find that what I think *does* count. Now, where is it? Cornelius just sent it ... I mean,” she gave a false little laugh as she rummaged in her handbag, “the Minister just sent it ... ah yes -” She had pulled out a piece of parchment which she now unfurled, clearing her throat fussily before starting to read what it said.

“Hem, hem ... Educational Decree Number Twenty-five.”

“Not another one!” exclaimed Professor McGonagall violently.

Umbridge kept her smile, although her lips tightened, causing her to look as if she were preparing to spit venom or some other noxious substance. “Yes, well ... 'The High Inquisitor will henceforth have

supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions and removal of privileges pertaining to students of Hogwarts, and the power to alter such punishments, sanctions and removals of privileges as may have been ordered by other staff members.' So you see, Minerva, it *is* my decision as to what punishment that he receives. Misters Weasley will deal with only their detentions, as, despite my dislike of questioning authority, they did do so for the very best of reasons, even if they were entirely wrong to do so." Her smile became vicious. "However, I fear that Mister Potter needs a much stronger punishment. He is hereby given a lifetime ban from flying. If he is ever caught on a broom in a situation that is not a matter of life and death, he will be arrested and sent to Azkaban."

"Excuse me?" Harry asked incredulously. "I punched the ferret in the stomach and you actually think that you can forbid me to fly for the rest of my life?"

She looked at him with a hard expression. "You will find, Mister Potter, that as a Ministry official, who speaks with the voice of the Minister here at Hogwarts, that I *do* in fact have the right to forbid you to fly ever again. Your broom, please."

"Ginny is using it to fly as Gryffindor Seeker," he replied, gripping it tighter.

"Well, she shall have to find another, since we are confiscating your broom to prevent you from breaking the ban. The broom, please."

He handed the broom over with extreme reluctance. She snatched it from his hands and threw it into the fireplace in the professor's office, followed quickly with "*Incendio!*" They all watched in horror as the broom quickly disappeared to ash. "There!" Umbridge said sweetly. "No more rule breaking on *that* front." She swept from the room, humming happily to herself.

"Mister Black, I -" McGonagall began, sounding sorry for the turn of events.

"Save it, Professor," Harry said sharply. "Crocodile tears are not what I need right now. Have I your permission to go back to my dormitory?"

I need to contact some people to ensure that Ginny has a broom to ride in Quidditch practice.”

“I shall see to that, Harry,” she said softly.

“Mister Black, if you please. I'd prefer to keep our relationship to the teacher-student one that it has always been, and will always be. Have I permission?”

McGonagall blinked rapidly a few times, looking as if she were holding back tears, and then nodded. Harry and the twins swept from the room.

“What happened?” Ron asked when they reached the tower.

“Umbridge burned his broom!” Fred yelled. “Right there in front of us!”

“She was humming as she left!” George added.

“She what?” Ginny exclaimed. “Why'd she burn it?”

“Because I have been forbidden to fly again during my lifetime, unless in a matter of life and death,” Harry explained coldly. “If I am caught on a broom, I will be sent to Azkaban.”

“What did McGonagall do?” asked Hermione.

“Nothing,” said Harry. “*They* have a week of detentions for talking back to Hooch, and I have a month for punching Malfoy and then talking back to her.” At the disbelieving looks from the Gryffindors, he said, “According to her, violence is never the answer. I was apparently supposed to deal with whatever curse that the ferret was going to cast.”

“Please tell me you're joking,” Angelina said.

“Nope. I called her integrity into question, which is when she upped my detention to a month.” He laughed with no humour in his voice. “I then made my point even more by asking to be reSorted. She called

me a coward at that point.” He stood. “I need to get into Hogsmeade and talk to my folks.”

“No need,” Sirius said as he walked in the portrait hole with Neville, Lily right behind him. “I heard from Neville about the fight. Good going on Malfoy.”

“Not according to McGonagall. I had a week of detention from her for making Gryffindor look bad by fighting, and that got upped to a month when I complained about her very Gryffindor-ness.” Sirius winced. “What I need to talk to you about is that promise you made about the end of the year?”

“Oh, buying you the top of the line Firebolt for your Quidditch career?” asked Sirius with a rakish grin.

“Yeah. Buy it for Ginny instead. I've been officially forbidden to fly ever again, unless in a matter of life and death.”

“Awfully severe, considering one of your tests when you leave school is to verify that you have at least a passing knowledge of flying. She actually banned you from flying while you're at school? How will you get back on the Quidditch team?”

“It was Umbridge who banned me. And I've been banned from flying for the remainder of my life. As she informed me, as a Ministry official with the ear of the Minister himself, she does have the right to ban me from the skies. Then she burned my Nimbus in McGonagall's fireplace.”

Lily's eyes blazed. “She will pay for this. She will not get away with it at all.”

“Well, good luck letting anyone know. Fudge has declared himself dictator of wizarding Britain, deciding what we will and will not learn, and the teachers here all rubber stamp it. I'm fairly certain that our mail is checked, so the students can't tell their parents what is going on. Someone might someday want to check our dear Minister's left arm. He's doing everything necessary to make sure that Voldemort comes back into power.”

The entry to the Gryffindor suite opened again, and Professor McGonagall stepped through with the Headmaster. "Miss Weasley?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am?" came the cold reply.

McGonagall turned to Harry. "Have we been telling tales, Mister Black?" she asked him, using the same tone that Ginny had. "I'd appreciate your not embellishing what happened."

"I have not embellished a thing that happened in your office, Professor McGonagall. I was as close to the truth as it is humanly possible for me to be, given that the incident is of course filtered through my own psyche."

"You should believe him, Minerva. With that statement, he is telling the absolute truth," said Albus.

"How can you tell?" McGonagall asked.

"Because High Inquisitor Umbridge is using a Contract Quill during her detentions. She has been forcing him to write 'I will not tell lies' during his detentions with her. This becomes a contract between them, and with the looseness of the phrasing, he has become unable to lie."

"Why didn't you say something, Harry?" McGonagall asked, now horrified.

"Mister Black, please. Calling me Harry assumes a closer bond between us than I can currently foresee existing ever again, ma'am. As for why I didn't say anything, I had every reason to believe, given your actions since school started, that nothing would be done. Today is a perfect example of that." He paused, and then added, "Ma'am? Have you considered retiring? Perhaps the job has gotten too much for you."

"If I retired, then I would be replaced with a Ministry employee. Who would protect you then?"

"We'd be receiving the same protection from our Ministry-approved head of House as we receive now. None that we are aware of." She staggered backwards as if he had physically struck her. "Now, what was the reason you came here, ma'am?"

She stared at him in shock for a long moment, and then shook her head. "I have arranged for the funds to purchase a broom for Miss Weasley."

"No thank you, ma'am," Ginny said stiffly. "I could not in good conscience accept it at this time. It would feel too much like bribery."

"We'll buy her one, Deputy Headmistress," Sirius said coldly.

Minerva McGonagall nodded slowly and left the tower with Albus. The assembled people could hear, as the door closed, "I had warned you, Minerva, where your -" The door closed on the rest of the conversation.

"I couldn't, Sirius!" Ginny said with a great deal more emotion, now that the door was closed.

"Consider it a loan until we can get Harry back into the air. We'll buy it for him, and since he was already loaning you his broom, he can continue to do so, if he doesn't mind."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Harry said. "So, once they buy me the new broom, you can take it and use it until they get Umbridge's ruling overturned."

He scowled. "Another thought comes to mind now. You guys with family in the Ministry pay attention to what Malfoy said. He threatened the Weasley family's very livelihood. The Death Eaters have a strong hold on the Ministry, either by bribing the people in power, or being in positions of power. They have a hate for me in the Ministry, because I'm either exposing their master, in Lucius Malfoy's case, or threatening their position of power, in Fudge's case."

"How are you threatening Fudge?" Colin Creevey asked, confused.

“By saying that Voldemort is back. Fudge is a peace time Minister, and doesn't want things to change. They'll think that he should have been able to stop Tom from returning somehow, so if he admits that I'm right, he might lose his position.” He growled. “Of course, being wrong, he'll have an even worse problem with things when proof comes out that the Dark Lord is back.”

He shook his head. “That's not what I wanted to say, though. Tell them to be careful. If they're of a mind to fight, do it through white mutiny or through careful forms of sabotage. Chances are, the Ministry is the only income some of your families may have, so don't threaten that income.”

He laughed, once again without humour. “I understand what the Deputy Headmistress is *trying* to do, but it's how she puts it in practice that bothers me. I'm telling you to tell your families exactly what McGonagall told me, but I also know that there comes a point when it's too much. She doesn't understand that, even having lived through the last war. She doesn't seem to understand the point where enough is enough.”

He looked to Ron. “You guys need to keep your noses clean. I wouldn't put it past Umbridge to get your dad fired if *you* guys bug her. If you have to pretend to hate me for something, please do. I like you guys too much to let you worry about where your next meal is coming from.”

The crowd in the common room broke up, the party they were planning on throwing not quite as important as it had been a short while earlier. When they were down to just a few people there, Harry grumbled. “I feel like a hypocrite. I blame McGonagall for doing something that I'm doing myself.”

“Wrong!” said Ginny hotly. “You know that there's a time to act. Her entire attitude seems to have been 'let the grown-ups deal with it'. She *has* been a hypocrite. You haven't been.”

“Maybe I'll convince myself of that some day.”

Hagrid returned that same night, and after a short visit where they discovered that he had been off visiting the giants (and not much more – he'd apparently learned to keep his tongue finally, from the sound of it), they were interrupted by Dolores Umbridge dropping by to inform Hagrid that she would be inspecting his class the next time that the fifth year students had Care of Magical Creatures. She crunched back up to the castle afterward.

“Watch out for that ... woman,” Hermione said. “She's out to get people who support Dumbledore too closely. Those who disagree with what the Ministry wants released, informationally speaking.”

“I'm just teachin' what I'm teachin',” he said. “They can't do much to me fer that.”

“You'd be surprised, Hagrid,” Harry said. “Just be careful, that's all we ask.”

“I'm always careful,” the half-giant exclaimed. They fought very hard not to laugh as he said it.

When their next class with him came, the three were nervous, but hid it well. He quickly led the class into the forest a distance, until the canopy overhead lent the clearing a dark and gloomy cast. He was carrying a dead cow over his shoulders. He finally brought the group to a stop, dropping the dead animal to the ground.

“Gather roun', gather roun',” Hagrid encouraged. “Now, they'll be attracted by the smell o' the meat but I'm goin' ter give 'em a call anyway, 'cause they'll like ter know it's me.”

He turned, shook his shaggy head to get the hair out of his face and gave an odd, shrieking cry that echoed through the dark trees like the call of some monstrous bird. Nobody laughed: most of them looked too scared to make a sound.

Hagrid gave the shrieking cry again. A minute passed in which the class continued to peer nervously over their shoulders and around trees for a first glimpse of whatever it was that was coming. And then, as Hagrid shook his hair back for a third time and expanded his

enormous chest, Harry nudged Ron and pointed into the black space between two gnarled yew trees.

A pair of blank, white, shining eyes were growing larger through the gloom and a moment later the dragonish face, neck and then skeletal body of a great, black, winged horse emerged from the darkness. It surveyed the class for a few seconds, swishing its long black tail, then bowed its head and began to tear flesh from the dead cow with its pointed fangs.

A great wave of relief broke over Harry. Here at last was proof that he had not imagined these creatures, that they were real: Hagrid knew about them too. He looked eagerly at Ron, but Ron was still staring around into the trees and after a few seconds he whispered, "Why doesn't Hagrid call again?"

Most of the rest of the class were wearing expressions as confused and nervously expectant as Ron's and were still gazing everywhere but at the horse standing feet from them. There were only two other people who seemed to be able to see them: a stringy Slytherin boy standing just behind Goyle was watching the horse eating with an expression of great distaste on his face; and Neville, whose eyes were following the swishing progress of the long black tail.

"Oh, an' here comes another one!" said Hagrid proudly, as a second black horse appeared out of the dark trees, folded its leathery wings closer to its body and dipped its head to gorge on the meat. "Now put yer hands up, who can see 'em?"

Immensely pleased to feel that he was at last going to understand the mystery of these horses, Harry raised his hand. Hagrid nodded at him.

"Yeah ... yeah, I knew you'd be able ter, Harry," he said seriously. "An' you too, Neville, eh? An' -"

"Excuse me," said Malfoy in a sneering voice, "but what exactly are we supposed to be seeing?"

For an answer, Hagrid pointed at the cow carcass on the ground. The whole class stared at it for a few seconds, then several people gasped and Parvati squealed. Harry understood why: bits of flesh

stripping themselves away from the bones and vanishing into thin air had to look very odd indeed.

"What's doing it?" Parvati demanded in a terrified voice, retreating behind the nearest tree. "What's eating it?"

"Thestrals," said Hagrid proudly and Hermione gave a soft "*Oh!*" of comprehension at Harry's shoulder. "Hogwarts has got a whole herd of 'em in here. Now, who knows -?"

"But they're really, really unlucky!" interrupted Parvati, looking alarmed. "They're supposed to bring all sorts of horrible misfortune on people who see them. Professor Trelawney told me once -"

"No, no, no," said Hagrid, chuckling, "tha's jus' superstition, that is, they aren' unlucky, they're dead clever an' useful! Course, this lot don' get a lot o' work, it's mainly jus' pullin' the school carriages unless Dumbledore's takin' a long journey an' don' want ter Apparate - an' here's another couple, look -"

Two more horses came quietly out of the trees, one of them passing very close to Parvati, who shivered and pressed herself closer to the tree, saying, "I think I felt something, I think it's near me!"

"Don' worry, it won' hurt yeh," said Hagrid patiently. "Righ', now, who can tell me why some o' yeh can see 'em an' some can't?" Hermione raised her hand. "Go on then," said Hagrid, beaming at her.

"The only people who can see Thestrals," she said, "are people who have seen death."

"Tha's exactly right," said Hagrid solemnly, "ten points ter Gryffindor. Now, Thestrals -"

"Hem, hem."

Professor Umbridge had arrived. She was standing a few feet away from Harry, wearing her green hat and cloak again, her clipboard at the ready. Hagrid, who had never heard Umbridge's fake cough before, was gazing in some concern at the closest Thestral, evidently under the impression that it had made the sound.

“Hem, hem.”

“Oh, hello!” Hagrid said, smiling, having located the source of the noise.

“You received the note I sent to your cabin this morning?” said Umbridge, in the same loud, slow voice she had used with him earlier, as though she were addressing somebody both foreign and very slow. “Telling you that I would be inspecting your lesson?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Hagrid brightly. “Glad yeh found the place all righ'! Well, as you can see - or, I dunno - can you? We're doin' Thestrals today -”

“I'm sorry?” said Professor Umbridge loudly, cupping her hand around her ear and frowning. “What did you say?”

Hagrid looked a little confused.

“Er - Thestrals!” he said loudly. “Big - er - winged horses, yeh know!”

He flapped his gigantic arms hopefully. Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows at him and muttered as she made a note on her clipboard: “Has ... to ... resort ... to ... crude ... sign ... language.”

“Only because the inspector is too stupid to understand otherwise,” Harry murmured, just quietly enough that Umbridge looked at him as if she hadn't quite heard him.

“Well ... anyway ...” said Hagrid, turning back to the class and looking slightly flustered, “erm ... what was I sayin'?”

“Appears... to... have... poor... short... term... memory,” muttered Umbridge, loudly enough for everyone to hear her. Draco Malfoy looked as though Christmas had come a month early; Hermione, on the other hand, had turned scarlet with suppressed rage.

Harry had pulled out a scrap of parchment and was making his own set of notes, after quietly casting a charm on the sheet. He also spoke. “Official Ministry inspector appears to be setting teacher up for fall, after intentionally acting deaf, and now verbally insulting teacher

in hearing of students, thereby intentionally lessening teachers effectiveness."

"Oh, yeah," said Hagrid, throwing an uneasy glance at Umbridge's clipboard, but ploughing on valiantly. "Yeah, I was gonna tell yeh how come we got a herd. Yeah, so, we started off with a male an' five females. This one," he patted the first horse to have appeared, "name o' Tenebrus, he's my special favourite, firs' one born here in the Forest -"

"Are you aware," Umbridge said loudly, interrupting him, "that the Ministry of Magic has classified Thestrals as "dangerous"?"

"Thestrals aren' dangerous! All righ', they might take a bite outta yeh if yeh really annoy them, but then again, a Muggle horse will do the same or kick yeh if yeh annoy them!"

"Shows ... *signs ... of ... pleasure ... at ... idea ... of ... violence,*" muttered Umbridge, scribbling on her clipboard again.

"Shows ... signs ... of ... anger ... if ... teacher not ... kowtowing ... to ... Ministry," Harry said as he wrote.

Umbridge did not answer, but was showing signs of turning purple; she finished writing her last note, then looked up at Hagrid and said, again very loudly and slowly, "Please continue teaching as usual. I am going to walk," she mimed walking (Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson were having silent fits of laughter) "among the students" (she pointed around at individual members of the class) "and ask them questions." She pointed at her mouth to indicate talking.

Hagrid stared at her, clearly at a complete loss to understand why she was acting as though he did not understand normal English. Hermione had tears of fury in her eyes now.

"You hag, you evil hag!" she whispered, as Umbridge walked towards Pansy Parkinson. "I know what you're doing, you awful, twisted, vicious -"

Harry scribbled furiously on his parchment. "Inspector ... speaks ... too ... slowly ... to ... be ... easily ... understood. Signs ... of ... mental ... deficiency ... in ... inspector?"

"Erm ... anyway," said Hagrid, clearly struggling to regain the flow of his lesson, "so - Thestrals. Yeah. Well, there's loads o' good stuff abou' them ..."

"Do you find," said Professor Umbridge in a ringing voice to Pansy Parkinson, "that you are able to understand Professor Hagrid when he talks?"

Harry turned to Hermione, "Do you find," he said in a tone that quite obviously mimicked Dolores Umbridge's, "that she is blatant in her bigotry when she talks?"

Umbridge purpled more and spun on Neville Longbottom. "You can see the Thestrals, Longbottom, can you?" she said.

Neville nodded.

"Who did you see die?" she asked, her tone indifferent.

"My ... my grandad," said Neville.

"And what do you think of them?" she said, waving her stubby hand at the horses, who by now had stripped a great deal of the carcass down to bone.

"I don't like them because they remind me of seeing Grandad die. But I imagine they're quite useful," he replied.

She tsk'ed at his statement "*Students ... are ... too ... intimidated ... by ... teacher ... to ... admit ... they ... are ... frightened,*" muttered Umbridge, loudly making another note on her clipboard.

"No!" said Neville, looking upset. "No, I'm not scared of them!"

"It's quite all right," said Umbridge, patting Neville on the shoulder with what she evidently intended to be an understanding smile, though it looked more like a leer to Harry. "Well, Hagrid," she turned

to look up at him again, speaking once more in that loud, slow voice, "I think I've got enough to be getting along with. You will receive" (she mimed taking something from the air in front of her) "the results of your inspection" (she pointed at the clipboard) "in ten days' time." She held up ten stubby little fingers, then, her smile wider and more toadlike than ever before beneath her green hat, she bustled from their midst, leaving Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson in fits of laughter, Hermione actually shaking with fury and Neville looking confused and upset.

Before she got very far, Harry yelled after her, "Do you have that much trouble with your fat little fingers that it's going to take you ten days to lie about him?" Umbridge stopped, but chose not to turn around, and continued her way to the castle.

"That foul, lying, twisting old gargoyle!" stormed Hermione half an hour later, as they made their way back up to the castle through the channels they had made earlier in the snow. "You see what she's up to? It's her thing about half-breeds all over again - she's trying to make out Hagrid's some kind of dimwitted troll, just because he had a giantess for a mother - and oh, it's not fair, that really wasn't a bad lesson at all - I mean, all right, if it had been Blast-Ended Skrewts again, but Thestrals are fine - in fact, for Hagrid, they're really good!"

"Umbridge said they're dangerous," said Ron.

"Us learning how to actually cast Defence spells is dangerous, according to her," Harry reminded him.

"Well, it's like Hagrid said, they can look after themselves," said Hermione impatiently, ignoring Harry's comment, "and I suppose a teacher like Grubbly-Plank wouldn't usually show them to us before NEWT level, but, well, they *are* very interesting, aren't they? The way some people can see them and some can't! I wish I could."

"Do you?" Harry asked her quietly. "I had to watch two Naga die in front of me. By my hand, yet."

She looked suddenly horrorstruck. "Oh, Harry ... I'm sorry ... no, of course I don't ... that was a really stupid thing to say -"

"It's OK," he said quickly, "don't beat yourself up over it."

"I'm surprised so many people *could* see them," said Ron. "Three in a class -"

"Too bad no one's made sure you can see them, Weasel," Malfoy drawled as he came close. "It would make your family useful for once."

Ron turned red, but before he could react, Harry said, "Pity that having one of yours snuff it wouldn't do any good. I don't think anything could make your life worthwhile." He cocked his head as he watched Malfoy turn colours. "Although if I thought that your father snuffing it might make you actually able to see the Snitch, I'd be willing to help your Quidditch career. Think you can get him around here for a bit? I'd think that others might like an actual challenge Seeking against you." He straightened up. "Well, I'd best get back to the castle, I'd imagine that your Head of House wants to give me a detention for breathing. Oh, that's right! Snape got *fired*! As Carroll would say 'Oh frabjous day! Caloo! Calay!'" He turned his back on the blond Slytherin and walked to the castle with the others.

"Harry, isn't taunting Umbridge dangerous?" Hermione asked. "Actually, with her here, taunting Malfoy is dangerous too."

He shrugged. "If I'm going to be getting detentions for telling the truth, then I might as well make it be an earned one for insulting someone. Shall we see if I get prevented from having dinner?"

Surprisingly, Umbridge chose not to give him a detention of any sort, although she did confiscate his parchment from Hagrid's class. Later, in the dorms, he chuckled as he pulled out his Journal of Umbridge Misdeeds (he had, in fact, titled it that way) and showed everything he had written on the parchment. "Little charm Dad taught me. Handy little thing, it is."

December arrived, bringing with it more snow and a positive avalanche of homework for the fifth-years. Prefect duties also became more and more onerous as Christmas approached, as they

were called upon to supervise the decoration of the castle ("I'm going to exorcise that poltergeist if he tries to strangle me with tinsel one more time," grumbled Harry one day after an attempt to help with the decorating), to watch over first- and second-years spending their break-times inside because of the bitter cold and to patrol the corridors in shifts with Argus Filch, who suspected that the holiday spirit might show itself in an outbreak of wizard duels ("He's got dung for brains, that one," said Harry, receiving a nearly imperceptible answering nod from Hermione).

Despite the increase in their work load, Harry found the rest of the month to be enjoyable, since Umbridge did not seem to be out to get him at the moment. He held a deep feeling of foreboding, however, sure that something ugly was coming soon. He wasn't sure what, and his friends all seemed to be looking forward to the break. Hermione was going skiing with her parents, something that greatly amused Ron, who had never heard of Muggles strapping narrow strips of wood on to their feet to slide down mountains. Parvati and her parents (and sister, of course) were going to be in India for most of the break, visiting relatives that the girls hadn't seen in years, or in some cases, ever. Harry, Sienna and James were, of course, going to be with Lily and Sirius for the break. Ron was hoping to visit during that time, since it seemed that he and Sienna were dancing around each other. She still gave her brother smouldering looks occasionally, but that was rare. Harry could tell that there was a pattern to it, but he hadn't placed exactly what it was yet.

Harry arrived early in the Room of Requirement for the last DA meeting before the holidays and was very glad he had, because when the torches burst into flame he saw that Dobby had taken it upon himself to decorate the place for Christmas. He could tell the elf had done it, because nobody else would have strung a hundred golden baubles from the ceiling, each showing a picture of Harry's face and bearing the legend: 'HAVE A VERY HARRY CHRISTMAS!'

Harry had only just managed to get the last of them down before the door creaked open and Luna Lovegood entered, looking as dreamy as usual.

"Hello," she said vaguely, looking around at what remained of the decorations. "These are nice, did you put them up?"

"No," said Harry, "it was Dobby the house-elf."

"Mistletoe," said Luna dreamily, pointing at a large clump of white berries placed almost over Harry's head. He looked startled, and even more so when Luna flowed forward and pulled him into an embrace, kissing him. He blinked for a moment, and decided to return the kiss. She was clumsy, but certainly seemed to be willing to learn. They broke a moment later as the door opened, and she said, "My apologies. It was the Nargles. They infest mistletoe."

"If they do things like that, they can infest any mistletoe they want," he said quietly. "You're a very nice kisser."

"Thank you, but we shouldn't tempt the Nargles. They make people fall in love if they aren't careful." She looked at Harry for a long moment, still looking unfocused, but Harry had the disturbing feeling that it might already be too late for Luna – the Nargles might well have done their work.

The Quidditch Hotties had been the ones to enter, and they were all cold from being out in the freezing weather. They each tackled him under the mistletoe and apparently had no complaints when they were done kissing him. "Now *that's* how to warm up after a practice!" Angelina sighed. Ginny was a short distance behind, walking in as Angelina finished, and queued up for her own kiss. Soon he had a line of girls waiting for their mistletoe kiss from Harry, and he chuckled, laughing outright when he found Fred and George in line as well.

"Well, Harry, don't we get our kiss?" asked Fred, batting his eyelashes.

"Don't you love us any more?" George added.

Finally, he managed to call the assembled group to order. "Okay. I thought this evening we should just go over the things we've done so far, because it's the last meeting before the holidays and there's no point starting anything new right before a three-week break -"

"We're not doing anything new?" said Zacharias Smith, in a disgruntled whisper loud enough to carry through the room. "If I'd known that, I wouldn't have come."

"- we can practise in pairs," said Harry, seeming to ignore Smith. "We'll start with the Impediment Jinx, for ten minutes, then we can get out the cushions and try Stunning again." He turned to Zacharias Smith. "The door is over there if you want to leave, Smith," was all he said.

After ten minutes on the Impediment Jinx, they laid out cushions all over the floor and started practising Stunning again. Space was really too confined to allow them all to work this spell at once; half the group observed the others for a while, then swapped over.

Harry felt himself positively swelling with pride as he watched them all. True, Neville did Stun Padma Patil rather than Dean, at whom he had been aiming, but it was a much closer miss than usual, and everybody else had made enormous progress.

At the end of an hour, Harry called a halt. "You're getting really good," he said, beaming around at them. "When we get back from the holidays we can start doing some of the big stuff - maybe even Patronuses."

"Why couldn't we have started them today?" Smith asked in his combative tone.

"Because it takes a lot out of you, and this is our last meeting before break. We can hope for it, but it's not a spell you can expect to cast two seconds after learning it – there are Aurors who can't cast the Patronus yet."

"We're just students!" Susan Bones exclaimed. "How can we do something that even Aurors can't do?"

Harry closed his eyes and drew on his best memories. He smiled as he remembered Sirius accepting him as his son. "*Expecto Patronum!*" A silver stag erupted from his wand and ran once around the room before it stopped in front of him and nodded before fading out.

He looked at Susan. "I'm just a student, Susan. Nothing special about me, really. If I can do it, then you can, too." He moved his gaze around the room. "This one will take a bit to learn, though, so you'll need the practice time. And since we're not really supposed to cast magic over this break, it's not fair to people to begin to teach them something that they can't work on, so we'll start in the first meeting of the new year."

The crowd nodded, excited about the possibility of learning this spell. "The first thing you'll want to think about, so that you can be ready when the new term starts, is what the happiest memory you have is. The more powerful the memory, the better. Now, let's all head back to our dorms and get ready to leave for Christmas. Happy Christmas, everyone."

Most of the crowd, filed out, leaving Harry's core group of friends, Susan, and Cho. "May I have a good memory, Harry?" Susan asked with a blush. He looked up and saw the mistletoe, then looked down at her and smiled.

"Well, it is tradition," he said and kissed her gently on the lips. He tried to ignore the slight moan that she released as they kissed.

"Wow," she breathed when the kiss ended. "How do you girls stay upright after kissing those lips?" she asked Angelina.

"I try not to, if you catch my drift," Angelina replied, eyes twinkling. Susan blushed furiously at that and sped from the room. "Poor girl's gonna have tired fingers tonight, Harry. Those lips are lethal."

"Well, I suppose that I should keep them in check then. No more kissing," said Harry with a smile. "Don't want to kill anyone, after all."

Katie gently smacked Angelina in the back of the head. "Good going, Ange!" she said in mock outrage.

Cho laughed. "Harry? Before you put everyone through a kissing drought, may I be permitted to kiss you under the mistletoe?" She looked shyly at him, and for some reason, Harry found that terribly alluring.

"She's passed the gauntlet, so we're good to go," Angelina said. Hermione was scowling very slightly, but she nodded as well, so Harry gently took Cho into his arms and kissed her.

By the time that they broke, she was crying in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed as best one can when stifling tears. "How did you get so good at kissing, Harry? That was almost a religious experience!"

"I've had some practice, and I've always been told that if you're going to do something, that you should do it right, and put everything you've got into it," said Harry with a smile.

"Well, you certainly kissed me right," she replied. Reluctantly, she let go of him and straightened her clothing. "I suppose I need to get back to my House and prepare to leave for the winter break." As she exited, she looked back in, and with a twinkle in her eyes said, "I'll be thinking naughty thoughts about you, Harry."

As her head disappeared from the doorway, he turned the colour of a beetroot, making the others laugh. "Minx," he mumbled, albeit with a smile on his face, and left the now straightened room with the rest of them.

The winter break came with its usual noise and fury of students trying desperately to make sure that they got to the train on time. Harry took the walk to Hogsmeade after seeing everyone off, somewhat sad to see Hermione leave, since he missed having her around, romantically speaking. He'd come to realise that all the girls meant something to him, but the ones that he found that he cared for most were all unavailable – Ginny was with Neville, Hermione was unavailable, and Fleur? Well, the less said about Fleur the better, as far he was concerned. Sienna and James chattered noisily alongside him as they walked, talking about classes and teachers and such, with Harry adding a word occasionally.

He walked into the house and shook off the snow in their mud room, leaving the cloak behind to dry. He took his bag to his room and settled in for a bit. He had a feeling of foreboding for this season, and

he had no idea. This was putting his nerves on edge, and he was trying everything he could to avoid snapping at people, since he knew it wasn't their fault. "I think I'm going to lay down," he told his mother as she came up and gave them all a hug. "I'm feeling ... I don't know, snappish? ... and I don't want to take it out on everyone else. Maybe I just need more sleep."

"All right, dear. If I haven't seen you up and around by dinner time, then I'll send someone to wake you." He nodded with a smile and headed up to lie down. He was asleep in surprisingly short order.

When he awoke an hour or so later, he was in a much better mood. He walked down the hall and opened the door into the joint water closet and shower. He splashed water on his face to wake up, and turned to leave. In doing so, he found a shocked Willow Rosenberg hiding behind the shower curtain, which was not quite enough to completely hide her nudity. Harry went white and bolted from the room, slamming the door to his room closed and casting *Colloportus* on it multiple times.

It was only about five minutes before he heard a knock at his door and Willow's voice outside it. "Harry? Are you all right?"

He contemplated remaining silent, but realised that he'd have to deal with the situation sooner or later. *I'm in Gryffindor. Gryffindors go forward.* "Give me a moment," he replied, casting *Finite Incantatem* until the door was finally free to open again. He opened it to show the somewhat amused form of the pretty redhead.

"Enjoy yourself?" she asked with a smirk.

"Not really. Kicking myself is not high on my list of things that I wanted to be doing. I'm sorry for humiliating you like that, Miss Rosenberg."

"What humiliation? It happens. Yeah, it's embarrassing, but I'm betting that you're more embarrassed than I was or am." She smiled as she spoke. As the smile changed back into a smirk, she asked, "Was it at least worth it?" He looked at her with a puzzled look. "Did you enjoy the view?" His blush was all the answer he could give her. "Then enjoy what you saw in your dreams."

He looked at her. "What? Am I going to demand that you forget what you saw? That route causes more problems than I'd like to think about." A cloud seemed to pass across her face, but she quickly shook it off. "I could threaten to pull your spleen out through your nose, like Buffy – well, Buffy would just threaten to rip your heart out of your chest. Xander is more into spleens. Anyway, what I'm really saying is that while I would have preferred it not happen, I'm not going to complain if I give you a few pleasant nights." He started to scowl, and she added, "I don't want you beating yourself up over this, Harry. Off is all right, but up isn't." She had the smirk back, and her eyes were twinkling.

He thought for a moment. "You're a magical researcher, right?"

"That's basically what I'm doing around here. I'm not what you'd call a witch or a wizard." She said simply.

"Pardon the crudity, but you certainly didn't look to be equipped to be a wizard," he said, hiding his face to hide the blush.

"That's not crude," she laughed. "Why do you ask about my research status?"

"Well, I was wondering if you can help me figure out how to search for something. Your reaction to my intrusion reminded me of something that's been bugging me recently." He inhaled deeply, using the time to put his thoughts together. "Over my time at Hogwarts, I seem to have developed what I've heard some people call a harem. I'm the only one at the school with this situation."

"You have a harem, and you're *complaining*?" she asked with a smile. "You really are something, aren't you?"

"How do you mean 'I'm really something'?" he asked, slightly annoyed.

She held up a hand. "Sorry, let me explain. That was a statement of admiration, by the way. I don't want you to think I'm making fun of you, but you have to admit that a fifteen year old boy complaining that he's got girls hanging off his arm could be considered more than a little unusual. After all, how would your other friends react?"

"Well, Ron would have to stop staring at Sienna long enough to notice, and Neville I think is a little too deeply interested in Ginny to care about other women. Dean? He'd probably enjoy it."

"Don't you have a fifth room-mate?" she asked.

"Seamus isn't a friend. He's stabbed me in the back one time too many. Don't you Americans have the phrase 'Three strikes and you're out'? He's had his third strike, telling me that he thinks that the Daily Prophet has the right of it. If he can tell me to my face that he thinks that I'm an insane trouble-maker out for attention, then I don't need him. But to answer the question I think you were *actually* asking, he'd be bragging about it, and trying to actively increase the number of women in it."

"So why are you worried about it?"

"I'm the only one! That's got to be unusual, to say the least! And when I get told during the summer by my *sister* that she wants to join and doesn't know why she feels this way? Then there's the fact that we had a meeting during October, when I had people asking to join! And the other girls have allowed it! There's something wrong here!" He stopped himself and made an effort to calm himself. "And then I barge in on a pretty girl just out of the shower, and rather than threaten me six ways from Sunday, she tells me to enjoy the memory! Honestly, what would you have done if one of the other males you know did that to you?"

Willow sat back for a moment. "Hard to judge, to be honest, since the person I am today has gotten here by doing some things that have led to some ... well, let me explain. Two years ago, if Xander had walked in on me, I'd have been flinging things at him, both physically and with spells. Today? I'd stand there and let him decide whether or not he wanted to look. I hurt him so badly that he should not have forgiven me." She stood and began to pace. "I hear you people talk about Unforgivable spells. I think that they're a killing curse, a pain curse, and a mind control curse. Yet your people throw around memory wipe curses with impunity! Memories are who you are! That's the most unforgivable thing you can do, wiping a man's memories! But you do it to stay safe, not thinking what it might do to

someone! I tried to ...” She sniffed deeply, and Harry realised that she was about to cry.

“Hey, it's all right,” he said, taking her into his arms and letting her sob on his shoulder. He had never quite figured out what to do when a girl cried, so he patted her back somewhat lamely.

She finally cried herself out and looked up at him, red-eyed. She snurked once, which led to Harry giving her a tissue. “Sorry about that,” she finally said. “I shouldn't drop my problems on you. Now what were you saying?”

He looked at her for a minute before saying, “You're right. I shouldn't be dropping my problems on you. Thanks for listening, though.” He smiled at her.

She looked at him for a long moment, somewhat puzzled, before what he was really saying sank in. A smile came to her face and she said, “Very sneaky, Harry. Are you like this with all the girls?”

“I'm like this with my friends.”

“Then I begin to see how you've developed a harem. I don't think there's a girl out there, straight or lesbian, who wouldn't be affected by a man who is willing to listen to their problems.”

“Well, yours sounds like it's much worse than mine. 'Help me, I have too many girlfriends!' This is a *problem*?” he finished with a laugh. “Now finish what you were saying.”

She took a deep breath, and he mentally slapped himself as he watched her sweater stretching. “Memories, I think it was. Yeah. Well, we had a really ... it was started by a vampire we knew, but we went along with him in abusing Xander, because Xander always forgave.” She sighed. “Except for that final time. He left, took Buffy's sister Dawn with him, because she wasn't safe any more around Spike. I'll explain Spike later. Let's just jump ahead. Buffy and I were stupid is the real important part of this. When things got too out of hand, I fell back on my crutch. Magic. I can ...*could* wield Wiccan magic like a pro. Pretty powerful shit, too. So I figured that if I could make him forget that the previous Saturday had happened; make him

'remember' that I'd supported him, rather than stabbed him in the back, everything would go back to the way it was, and we'd be good. I did this even after swearing I'd never do it again."

She sighed. "Dawn has always crushed on him, and it turned into love somewhere along the line. And he was returning that feeling, apparently. My spell caught them hard, and due to something I didn't know at the time, he had warning. They fought it successfully – thank the Goddess, I say now – and his team sent people out who took *me* out. I woke up in a cell, and was informed by both Dawn and Xander that it was over."

"I'd just lost everything. And I'd had pointed out to me that I was addicted to magic. It was my crutch. Why get up and get a soda from the fridge when I can magic it out? Why talk your way out of something when you can tweak someone's point of view with magic? Why let things stand as they are when you can magically make them forget something? Story too long made as short as possible, I had some people help me bind my powers. It involved me talking to my Goddess in the process. I swore to her that I would never use magic again, at the cost of my immortal soul. If I ever fall back on that crutch, I will die and my soul will simply ... go away. There will be no afterlife for me. And that's the way that it should be. Because of my addiction, I abused my friendships. For some reason, Dawn and Xander are willing to treat me as a friend, although I don't deserve it. Someday I will actually earn their friendship again. It's why I insist on treating him as my boss, and not my friend. I lost *that* right the day I tried to rewrite his brain."

"The second time you tried it?" he asked.

"Yeah. I did it a year or so earlier to my girlfriend Tara," she replied. "Too much power, and I effectively wiped her mind." She scowled. "No, I'll do it *right* this time.' There is no right way to mind fuck someone."

Harry looked at her for a long moment before saying, "Can I talk with this Xander or Miss Summers?"

Willow started in shock, then pulled her phone out of her purse. She hit what was obviously a speed dial button, and then waited for a

second. "What am I doing?" she asked. "It's what, seven AM there? He's not going to ... Mister Harris!" she finished in surprise. "I know it's early. I forgot about the time difference. Yeah, I know. Remember that person I was sent to find out about? He'd like to talk to you." A moment later, she was holding the cellular telephone out to Harry.

"Hello?" he asked.

"Mister Black? This is Alexander Harris. How may I help you?"

"Actually, I'm calling for some information, if you don't mind. I've been talking with Willow, and she was explaining a little of how she got to where she is now, and ..." He paused. "How did I get from asking about why I have a harem to talking to someone in California?" he asked Willow suddenly. She chuckled and shrugged.

"You have a harem?" was the question at the other end of the line. There was amusement there as well.

"Well, that's what it's been called. I was wondering if it was a magical effect, and we somehow got into a conversation about her life in the last couple years. I guess I got to wondering about forgiveness, since I'm a pretty stiff-necked bastard." After a pause, he said, "Well, I'm not a bastard, we discovered, but I'm still stiff-necked. What ... how ... damn I don't even know why I'm wasting your time with this call. I'm sorry for bothering you this early. Let me hand you back to Willow."

Another voice – female - came on the line. "Did she tell you about what happened within the last few years?"

"Memory spells and the like? Yeah."

"I'd like to meet you some day, Mister Black," Harris said. "She never opens up like that. You've known her since September and she told you that much? You have my respect."

"You're asking about forgiveness, though, aren't you?" the female asked. "This is Dawn Summers, by the way."

"Yeah, I guess I am. I wanted your take on the story. I know how easy it is to beat yourself up when you know you're in the wrong. I guess I wanted a second opinion about her 'crime'."

"What did she tell you?"

"Reliance on magic as a crutch and a second attempt at memory modification, basically. With you and Xan ... I'm sorry. Mister Harris."

"Go ahead. If she's calling me Xander again, then there's some hope."

"I think she's only doing it remembering the time that it happened. She strikes me as someone who's going to stick to her decision. She doesn't think that she's earned the right to call you Xander. What's that short for, anyway? Or is your name actually Xander?"

"Alexander. I don't like my full name and ignore it wherever possible, so feel free to call me Xander," said the voice on the California end.

"Yes, Mister Harris," Harry said.

"Xander, please," was the reply. "Mister Harris makes me think of my father." The tone on the other end was unmistakeable to someone like Harry.

"I think I understand you – Xander," replied Harry.

"Yes, well, we're getting far afield," Dawn Summers interjected. "And before I drag us, kicking and screaming, back on track with this conversation, I'm telling you that I want you to call me Dawn, okay?" At Harry agreement, she said, "Okay, back on track. What she told you is true. Things went to hell, brought on by a number of bad decisions on a number of people's parts. She tried to modify Xander's and my memories. We took this more than a little ..."

"You were less than pleased, shall we say?"

"That's one way of putting it. The willingness to forgive came from her willingness to change – she's put her soul in jeopardy if she ever tries magic again. That's really the important part of the equation. You may

want to forgive someone, but they have to be willing to make an attempt to earn that forgiveness. Forgiveness can't actually be earned, but -"

"Well, yes it can, but only by someone who realises that it *can't* be earned," said Harry, voicing the epiphany he'd had while listening to Dawn. "If you're trying to earn it, then it's selfish. If you're simply trying to repair the damage, knowing that you don't *deserve* forgiveness, then that's when you're earning it." He met Willow's eyes.

"How old are you, Mister Black?" came both voices at once.

"That's something most people never learn," Xander said.

"I've had an interesting fifteen years," Harry replied with a small chuckle.

"Did we help answer your questions?" Dawn asked.

"Well, I'm still up in the air on the harem question, but I'll figure that out some way or another. I mean, if it's just a natural thing, that I've somehow attracted all these girls, then I'll sit back and enjoy it. But if it's some magical effect, where I'm effectively forcing their attraction, then I want it studied and stopped immediately. I'll earn the affections of the girls, not force them." He was growling by the time he'd finished.

There was silence for only a moment. "Well, given that attitude, I'm betting your natural charm is part of it," Xander said quite seriously. "I hate to cut this short, but could I speak with Willow again?"

"Thank you for talking to me, considering the fact that you don't know me. I'll hand you back to Willow now." The telephone made its way back to the pretty redhead, who sat and listened for a while, adding the occasional "Yeah," and "Okay," and even a "Of course, Mister Harris." This last was followed shortly by her eyes opening widely and filling with tears. "But I don't deserve ... yes, okay – Xander."

She finally ended the connection and sniffed once. She looked at him for a long moment. "Please don't misunderstand this, Harry, but ... you've helped me see something important. I want to thank you." She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips. There was no

romantic passion behind it, however; somehow he could feel that the great emotion driving this kiss was gratitude.

When it broke, he said, "You're welcome. My comments about forgiveness brought that about?" He smiled.

"He told me 'My friends call me Xander.' Considering the fact that he told me goodbye two years ago, for the reason that I gave you, to know that he considers me a friend again is ..." She lost her composure for a moment. "Xander ..." Her face split into a grin that made Harry realise just what she might have looked like when she was his age. "I can call him Xander again!" she cried out, and stood and danced around Harry's room for a few moments.

She came back to herself suddenly and attempted to match her hair colour. "Don't be embarrassed," he said with a smile. "Sounds to me like he gave you the best Christmas present he could possibly have wanted to." Blushing himself, he added, "Do have any idea just how much prettier you got with that smile on your face? You were so solemn before, and now ... now you look like you'd happily go outside and start a snowball fight, just to have fun."

"That sounds like a great idea!" she exclaimed. "Can we get the rest of your family involved?"

"Sounds like an idea to me," Sirius said with a grin from the door.

A little while later he was leaning against a tree, catching his breath, when Willow came over and plopped into the snow next to him. "This is really fun," she said. "I grew up in southern California, so we don't really see snow that often. I like this."

"It is fun. I just wish that Hermione and the Weasleys were here to join the fun." He thought for a moment. "Don't take this wrong, but what are you doing here in England when your home is in America, during Christmas?"

"It's easier to do it this way, since right after Boxing Day I need to get back to my research. I'm finding some very disturbing information that

I'm tracing down, and for me to fly to California, wasting at least a day each way, then another day recovering from the travel, well, I don't want to lose the time from my studies."

Harry laughed. "Sounds like Hermione. Careful about saying that around her – I think she might already be sweet on you."

"She's a lesbian?"

"Bisexual – well, I think. I know she's interested in girls, though. For all I know, that could be a sign of me having a power that's forcing the girls into this 'harem' thing." He paused. "You know, that's probably the case. She made this huge thing about not being romantic with anyone this year, after having a year last year when she says that she was paying more attention to romance with me and Ron than to her studies. She's always been more comfortable around Ginny."

He sighed. "Wonderful. The women I really care for are either in relationships, lesbians, or run away at high speed when they get too close." He looked up. "I don't want to settle, you know? But that's likely what I'm going to have to do."

"Getting a bit ahead of things, aren't you?" Willow asked. "You don't know what could happen. Hermione could be the one for you. Hell, Buffy might come over and decide that you're her man, and trust me, if she makes that decision, you might as well just come along for the ride." Her eyes twinkled. "Heh. You'd be the envy of a few of us if you get to ride Buffy," she said with a sly smile. When he understood her meaning, he blushed furiously. "Gotcha! This conversation is too heavy for such a wonderful day. Let's get back to the snow fight!" She picked up a handful of snow and threw it into the air, watching it waft down into their hair. He laughed, and they rejoined the fracas. It could honestly be said that a good time was had by all that day

Christmas had come, as had Boxing Day, and it was now the twenty-ninth of December. Harry had noticed that Dumbledore had come over for a while, and had promised to return later that evening. After he was gone, Harry noticed that his parents were more than a little

disturbed. Remus was visiting, as was James Potter, and even they looked concerned about something, apparently regarding him.

"Okay," he said finally at about six PM, when he'd watched his mother look at him for what he was sure was the tenth time with a worried look. "Enough is enough. Can we get the Headmaster here, since I'm quite certain that I'm not going to find out why everyone is walking on eggshells around me until he arrives?"

"What do you mean, Harry?" his mother asked, trying to be glib.

He glared at her. "Why is it all right for you to lie to me, but if I do the same, I get a lye soap mouthwash?" Sirius winced. "And that reaction tells me that I'm right. The Headmaster told you something, and it involves me. I think I have a right to know."

Lily winced. "I just think that you're too young ..."

"You used to respect me, Mum," Harry interrupted. "You supported me in decisions, treating me as an adult, when I was eleven. Did I do something to lose that respect?" Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth, but nothing came out. He shrugged and walked from the room quickly, before anyone could react. He quickly made a sign that read 'Gone Flying' and called one of the family brooms to himself. *I really don't give a shit if they arrest me for flying, he thought. I need to get away for a while.*

He flew for a time in the bitter almost-January air before landing on the bluff he'd been at this summer. *I hope I don't get Dumbledore arriving again. This is not a time I want to see him.* He sat on the bluff overlooking the cold lake and glared down at the town and at his home after casting a warming charm on himself, but the glare quickly disappeared, replaced by depression. *What did I do to lose their respect? Am I too hard-headed this year? Should I be knuckling under to the Ministry? Maybe I can write a retraction and become just what McGonagall wants me to be. What happened to make them act like that?*

He cast another warming charm. *What hurts is losing their trust. They used to tell me things that impacted me. What changed? Are they tired of my inflexibility? I have been pretty stupid about it.* He looked

down at the scars on his hand. *Proof that I'll carry with me until my dying day. Which, given Riddle, probably isn't that far off.*

He looked down at the new watch he'd been given and realised that he'd been up here for close to an hour. *They didn't even send anyone after me. Now I know my temper has something to do with this.* He sighed. *I'd best go down there and work things out with them.* He mounted the broom and flew back to the house, putting it away and walking into the mud room to clear his shoes and cloak.

He walked into the family room and cleared his throat, making everyone jump, including Peter who had finally shown up. "Before anyone gets into giving me the chewing out I deserve," he said before anyone could speak, "please let me say this, since I realised it on the bluff where I disappeared for the last hour. Yes, I flew there, and since that's illegal for me, I expect to at least lose several privileges, such as my Hogsmeade visits."

"What ever the punishment, I need to say this. I have realised just how hard headed I've been these past years, and that needs to change. I need to learn the lesson that Professor McGonagall has been trying to teach me – make no waves. Let it blow over. All I'm doing by insisting on Voldemort's return is making my biological father look insane, as Professor Umbridge is very fond of reminding everyone, ignoring the fact that he's the victim of lingering spell damage. I'm hurting Sienna and Jimmy through my actions, and by my stupid insistence that I always be right, I've thrown away the friendship with Seamus. Of *course* I look like an idiot saying Voldemort is back!" He ignored the wince from most everyone there. "I've been too stubborn to realise that I need to stop ... pardon the language, but I need to stop being an asshole to everyone, and I need you guys to help me with that. I've finally learned what I needed to learn years ago, and I hope you'll forgive me."

"It sounds like you learned the wrong lesson, son," Sirius said. "Next thing you'll be telling me is that you should be apologising to your Grandfather Potter for saying you should have been drowned at birth."

"Isn't he right, though? Blood *does* tell, doesn't it? He thought I was the child of a Death Eater."

"Does that make me evil, Harry?" Sirius asked. "I'm the only Gryffindor in a family full of Slytherins, and Dark aligned Slytherins at that. Blood should tell. Shouldn't I have a Dark Mark by that logic?" Harry's face fell at that. "That's what *that* ... idiot never understood."

"Language, Sirius," Dumbledore said as he entered the room. "I heard the most recent comments and find myself worried. You feel that you have done something wrong, Harry?"

"Well, haven't I?" asked Harry. "You dropped by earlier, and suddenly they went from happy to looking sideways at me, and walking on eggshells, as the saying goes. Then when I asked about what was going on, Mum lied to me. I've done something to lose the trust that they once had in me. Breaking the law about an hour ago doesn't help any." At Dumbledore's confused look, he said, "I flew to the bluff to think. That's where I realised that I'm not doing any good by fighting the Ministry – all I'm doing is proving their case that I'm an attention seeking, mentally unstable child. So I need to apologise to Professor McGonagall and everyone else for making their lives harder."

Lily began to cry over in the corner. "And now I've made Mum cry. I think we'd all be better off if I just head to my room while you adults figure out my punishment."

"We're sorry, Harry," Remus said. "Please stay, and we'll explain what the problem is. We didn't realise how things looked to you, and for that, we're sorry."

Lily sniffed and walked over, pulling Harry into a hug. "I'm sorry, Harry. We heard a disturbing rumour today, and Albus was going to be checking it out as best he could."

"It is, unfortunately, true," the Headmaster said.

"I know that we'll be prolonging the news longer, but can we at least announce some good news first?" Sirius asked. "It's something I think he should know anyway. Besides," he said, looking to his adopted

son, "you won't want to listen to anything else after we tell you the bad news."

Harry nodded at him, and Lily took his right hand and put it on her stomach. "You might want to say hello to your new brother or sister, Harry. Sirius and I are having a baby." His face lit up, sweeping all the bad that he had felt earlier away. "Yeah," insisted, grinning at her son. "I'm about two months along, we figure."

Harry hugged her tightly, whispering, "I'm sorry for being a prat just now, Mum. I -"

"Don't you dare apologise for our mistake," she said. "I can understand why you thought the way you did, and that's *our* fault."

There was some time taken for celebration, and then Peter cleared his throat. "Okay, now for the bad news. Two bits of it, really. One is a secret I've kept from you for a long time, Harry, but that you have every right to know. That secret is how we learned the other piece of information that directly involves you." He took a deep breath and then walked over to Harry. "Harry, I am a spy for the Order of the Phoenix within the ranks of Voldemort's Death Eaters."

Harry started at the news, and then yanked his 'uncle's' left sleeve upwards. "You won't find a Dark Mark anywhere on my body. I managed to convince him that I would not be able to effectively hide it from my closest friends, and that suddenly pulling away from them would only make them fight that much harder to find out what was wrong. I am only called occasionally, since I can't be called by the Mark. I am occasionally sent a secure owl, such as what happened last night into today."

Peter began to walk furiously back and forth across the room. "The fact that this news is coming out is going to destroy my cover, but I can't sit by and do nothing at a time like this." He stopped and stood before Harry again, reaching up as if to take Harry's shoulders, but stopping suddenly, realising that his 'nephew' probably wouldn't want to be touched by a Death Eater. He dropped his hands, but Harry pulled the man into a quick hug. "Know that I *will* die before I allow him to hurt you, Harry. It was most believable for me to be a 'traitor' to the Marauders because I've always been the one behind the scenes.

Everyone knew Remus and your fathers. I was known as a friend who was in the background. So giving You-Know-Who a story about wanting something of my own, my own star, so to speak, sold him. I'm well trained enough in Occlumency that I can hold him off."

He began pacing again. "Last night we got called for an important announcement. It appears that Voldemort was finally willing to show off his greatest accomplishment. His means of permanently destroying you was at hand."

Peter stopped in front of Harry and put his hands on the young man's shoulders. "Harry, he brought out Bellatrix Lestrange. She's seventh months pregnant with your child."

Chapter 17

Harry sat on the bluff again, looking down at the town of Hogsmeade. The conversation had gone differently than the adults had thought – he had not taken to yelling and screaming. “Why would I scream at you?” he had asked them. “It’s certainly not *your* fault that it happened.” He was less than happy about the scenario, however, for obvious reasons.

A crunching noise happened behind him and he looked up to see Willow walking through the frozen snow toward him. He Vanished some snow and heated an area next to himself, which made her smile as she availed herself of his hospitality. “So,” she said, “thinking, pouting, mentally screaming at the world, or just numb?” The small smile on her face took any sting out of the words.

“I got the pouting out of the way back in the summer. She raped me, that’s it, no way to take it back. Can’t say I’m happy about it, but there isn’t much I can do. Screaming only wastes energy. What I’m trying to do is figure out a way to kidnap Bellatrix until my baby is born. I do not want her doing anything with that child. I want it to have the kind of childhood I didn’t. Because of some curse that they never completely cured him of, James Potter – my biological father – hated me and made sure that I knew it. His father is just an idiot and has no curse as an excuse.” He paused. “They’ve gone through this whole thing about how I should forgive my father because it was all caused by the curse. He’s been to St. Mungo’s so that they can rebuild him. Who rebuilds me after fifteen years of crap from him?” She stayed wisely silent.

“He needs to earn that forgiveness,” finished Harry finally. He looked down at the town and his home and then stood. “I need to go down there and listen to them explain why my idea is a horrible one, once they actually hear my idea.” He reached out a hand and helped her to her feet. “Sorry for giving you so little time to get comfortable. Shall we head back?” He grabbed the broom he had leaning against the tree and mounted it, then offered her a hand up onto it. “I don’t care that it’s against the law for me to fly. That law was purely for purposes of ensuring that I break it some day. So I do.” He flew back down to the house, ignoring as best he could that he had a very attractive

adult woman pressed fairly close to him as they flew, one who seemed to enjoy the warmth his body was radiating.

He once again shook and stomped the snow off and placed his cloak on the peg, followed by helping Willow out of her cloak. He walked down the hall to where the group was together yet again, trying to solve some problem or another. "So, what's the decision so far?"

"We're pretty well agreed," Sirius said, "but our problem is figuring out how to put it into play."

"What are you talking about?" asked Harry.

"Well, we like to think that we know you pretty well," said Peter with a grin, "so we're trying to figure out a method of grabbing Bellatrix in the next month or so in order to keep you from haring off on your own to capture her. Considering that she is by far the most dangerous of all his Death Eaters ... well, we love you and want your child to have a father when it's born."

"Wait, so you agree that we need to ..." he asked incredulously. A grin broke across his face. "I don't have to get into a loud argument to explain why we should do this, pulling out emotional blackmail if necessary?"

With a huge grin on his face, Sirius answered, "We can if you want to, but it's kind of unnecessary." Lily just shook her head, chuckling, and both Remus and Peter were laughing. James Potter sat at a table, parchment before him, and a quill in his hand. "C'mon, James," Sirius said. "Join us! We've been brainstorming enough."

"This is serious, Sirius!" James yelled, obviously shocked into noticing that there were other people in the room. "I am not going to let my grandson or granddaughter be some potion component, or whatever use You-Know-Who has for the child. I want that child to have a better life than the one I gave Harry." He slammed his hand down on the desk, spilling the ink bottle. "Shit!" he yelled jumping to his feet. A quick Vanishing Charm later, and the area was clean again. He turned to say something more, but was drawn up short by the sight of Harry. "Oh! I ... umm ... never mind," he finished lamely. "I'd best go and let family be."

"You're still the father of Sienna and Jimmy," Harry said with a smile. "You're my father as well, but I think I understand what you meant. I don't have a problem if you stick around, Father." He paused. "Any ideas that seem to work? You did seem to be thinking pretty hard about it."

"There are none that I can think of that don't require spell research time to invent a new spell," he replied. "Merlin knows that I wish that there was a spell that could force her to just show up, but that's a pipe dream."

Albus looked up in surprise. "Give me a moment, please." He walked to the fireplace and opened a Floo connection to "Amelia Bones!"

A few minutes later, with the permission of Sirius and Lily, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was in their living room. "I understand that you have a problem I might be able to help you with?"

"Harry? You're the affected individual – perhaps you should explain to her?" Sirius said.

"I suppose," he said. "Given the Ministry's views on me right now, though, I think that's a sure-fire way to make sure I end up in the Long Term Care wards at St. Mungo's." Madam Bones looked slightly confused at his comments. "No disrespect, Madam, but you *have* to have seen the papers and listened to your co-workers."

"I tend to ignore gossip amongst the work staff unless it connects to a investigation," she replied with more than a little asperity. "I haven't trusted the Daily Prophet in quite some time, either. Now, would you mind explaining why I was brought here by the Headmaster?"

He shrugged. "We've gotten word that Bellatrix Lestrange is pregnant. The timing is such that it must be my child, fathered during the rape that happened when Voldemort was brought back to a body. Personally, I don't want the child raised as a Death Eater or used as a spell component in some vile ritual. We commented about a spell that could force her to show up, and the Headmaster had a brainstorm."

"I'm not surprised," Madam Bones said with a smile. "There is a spell for locating lost children that might be usable here. It forces them to come to a specific person, a bond between the tracker and the one being tracked. The problem is, Mister Black, it always works best with a parent as the person connected to the spell."

"Okay, so what happens if we cast it with me as the focus? Unless she gave birth early, she's got about two months to go yet if I'm remembering things right. Is the spell going to drag her to me? Will it drag me to her?"

"Usually the spell draws the missing child to the parent. They end up walking toward each other. Well, Apparating in the parent's case, if they have the skill, but the idea is the same."

Harry thought for a long moment. "So we could triangulate by me pointing in a direction that we can head toward, someone side-along Apparates me, and then we continue to narrow it down. Or I get a dispensation to fly for purposes of saving a child's life." He paused. "I wonder if Voldie is still staying near that family plot that he got his father's bone dust from?"

"What's this?" Amelia Bones asked. "You know where he was staying?"

"I don't know the name of the town, but if you've got contacts in the Muggle law enforcement, I'd check on where a man named Riddle lived and died. It's probably considered an unsolved case for them, but Voldemort killed his father, Tom Riddle, who was a Muggle."

"Excuse me?" she asked, incredulous. "The head of the Pureblood movement is a half-blood?"

"Tom Marvolo Riddle. Head Boy at Hogwarts for the 1944-1945 school year, if I remember correctly. His father's grave is in a cemetery somewhere ... it's not close to school, I know that much. The mountains you see in this area were not visible."

He shook his head. "Right now, that's somewhat unimportant, except that it might tie into where Lestrage is. I may only be fifteen, but I

want that baby to have a chance, and I'm willing to do what's necessary to give it that chance."

"Well, we should be able to cast the spell before the break between terms is over," Amelia said. "Our next worry is to see how to keep her under control for the next several weeks."

"Can we bring Madam Pomfrey into this?" Harry asked. "I think that if we explain to her exactly why we're doing this, she'll come on board."

"I believe that she will, as well," Dumbledore said softly. "Bellatrix Lestrange murdered one of Poppy's nieces in the first war. Anything that allows her to fulfil her Healer's oath *and* spit in Bellatrix Lestrange's eye, metaphorically speaking, will be fine by her. And she would best be suited to keeping the mother sedated without risking the child."

"Then let's get her here," James Potter said. "The sooner we get the plan worked out, the sooner we can save Harry's child."

Hermione, Ron and Ginny both arrived on the twenty-eighth to find a bustle of activity that had nothing to do with the holiday season. "What's going on, Harry?" asked Hermione, intrigued at all the various evidence of a major undertaking in the offing.

"We're getting ready for a snatch and grab mission of extreme importance and danger," he replied with a frown.

"Whose sn -" Ginny started to ask before Hermione had clamped her hand tightly over the protesting redhead's mouth, while Ron wasn't sure whether to be shocked or laugh, so he did both and released a snort.

"Don't even think of finishing that," hissed the blushing brunette. Harry could hear the giggle emanating from behind Hermione's hand.

"I needed the chuckle," said Harry with a wan smile. "Thanks, Ginny. I got your joke." He went suddenly serious. "Problem is, we're trying to rescue my child."

His three friends looked at him in stunned disbelief, which he did not see as he turned to look at the adults. He did not want to see the look in their eyes. "Simply put – when Bellatrix Lestrange raped me in May, she got pregnant by me. We're working out how to get her, keep her sedated until the baby is born, and then deal with her from there. Otherwise, Voldemort uses the child to kill me permanently. We don't know how, but he apparently has a plan."

He found himself surprised when he felt two pairs of arms come around his body, and Ron walked around in front of him. "Did you think we'd hate you now, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"No ... yes ... I don't know!" he exclaimed loudly. "I'm fifteen and worried about a baby! I should be worried about finding some girl to sneak up to the Astronomy Tower to get practice in making one, not worrying about whether or not I can *raise* a child! And what girl is going to want to get involved with me after this, if we do save the child? 'Hi, honey! If we get married, you have an instant family!' You will believe a woman can fly – *without* a broom!"

"Not every girl would act that way," Willow interjected. "Let's be honest – a girl will do that, but a *woman* won't. Someone who cares for you as you will understand." She snorted. "The little girl I was three years ago would have run away screaming at the responsibility, saying instead that she had *more* important things to deal with. World saving things. It took a girl not yet an adult then to show me that she was more mature than I was. Xander is one lucky man."

"Not every girl is going to run screaming, Harry," Hermione repeated. "Whether or not we ever get romantically involved again, I will be there for you, as your friend, if nothing else."

Harry hugged her. "That means everything to me. Thank you."

"So what's the plan?" Ron asked. "When and where are we going?"

"We aren't going anywhere," Harry said. "I am going with Madam Bones and a contingent of Aurors to locate Bellatrix Lestrange and rescue my baby."

"Harry, we're not going to abandon you in this," Ginny exclaimed.

Madam Bones walked over. "I overheard what was being said, and I think that you four are talking at cross purposes, Miss Weasley. Mr Black will be accompanying us not because he wants to, but because his involvement in this endeavour is a requirement. Literally – without him, we would be unable to locate Bellatrix Lestrange. As it is, it is uncertain that our plan will work, but without his involvement, there would be little to no hope of success. Were this a situation of him wishing to come along rather than it being vital to the success of the mission, I would deny it faster than Fudge can accept a campaign contribution."

"I don't want this mission to even have to happen, let alone be part of it," Harry said. "You can forget about *wanting* to face the most psychotic of his followers. Again." He turned to Madam Bones. "So, how soon before we take to the skies?"

"Harry, you'll be arrested!" Hermione said. "You've been forbidden to fly!"

"That will be dealt with," Madam Bones said. "I can't do it right now, with Fudge's stranglehold on the Ministry being so strong, but it *will* be overturned at some point."

Peter stepped forward. "Madam Bones, may I ask what the expected outcome this mission has?"

"Given Bellatrix Lestrange and the deadliness of You Know Who's Death Eaters, I'm expecting that we'll be telling some of the Auror's families that their relative died in the line of duty," she replied, scowling deeply. "But if we have the chance to spit in the eye of the Dark Lord, I want to take it."

"I have an idea that just might solve the problem for us, Director," Peter said with a grin before turning to the others in the house. "Hey Prongs!" he called out. "If we needed to kidnap someone – let's use the old Potions prof for a moment – would we go in force?"

"Hell no! You can't prank someone if you let everyone know what you're doing!" James replied.

Lily started laughing. "Peter, you darling man! You once again prove how you and Remus were the brains of the outfit."

"What's that make James and me, the beauty?" Sirius asked, puffing up his chest and buffing his nails.

"No, that was me. You and James were the comic relief." She was grinning widely as she said it.

"You can't be serious," Remus said.

"No, that's me," said Sirius, matching his wife's grin. "In all honesty, though, it's perfect. A frontal assault is what everyone would expect if word got out that we knew. By staying silent about it, we should stay safe. So we prank the Dark Jerk by stealing his major psycho."

"Wait, are you asking us to let you just walk in, grab her, and leave?" Madam Bones asked. "How do you have any hope of succeeding?"

"Because they'll all be planning for a frontal assault, with wands blazing, and that sort of American Wild West crap," Peter said. "Trust me on this. If we go in quietly, with the mindset that we are pranking someone, we'll go right around most of the protections and such."

"How can you verify this?" Madam Bones insisted.

"I was the spy in the midst of the Death Eaters in the last war, and in this one. I have no Dark Mark, thank Merlin. If you so desire, when this conflict is over, I will turn myself in as a Death Eater." He paused. "You will likely want the Aurors ready, because when he finds out that Bella is gone, he is likely to order a rampage."

"Won't he think she's wandered off?" the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement asked.

"Anyone other than her, possibly," Peter replied. "Bella, on the other hand, is -"

"- a psycho willing to slice off her own hand at the direct order of her lord and master," Harry interrupted. "I know. I watched her do it. She

got off on the pain. If her half-blood master tells her to stay put, she will."

"Harry is right, Director," Peter said. "She's unbelievably brutal and psychotic, but she will quash all those urges if You-Know-Who tells her to calm down." He paused. "She'll go on a killing rampage afterwards, but for the time being, she's staying right where You Know Who tells her to stay."

It only took one more day before they were prepared for the assault. Amelia Bones arrived quite early, and the group gathered to wait for the charm to be cast upon Harry. His immediate group of friends stood with worried looks on their faces.

"Alright," Madam Bones said, "we have a group of Aurors on back-up to come quite soon after the signal that Mr Pettigrew states will be unmistakeable. We will be casting the charm on young Mr Potter and following him. This mission is going to be as short as is possible for us to make it, is that understood?" She looked significantly at the Marauders.

"Any good prank is over quickly," James said. "Too easy to get caught if you get cute with it. We're in, we grab the pregnant psycho-bitch, we run for it while Peter sets off our version of the Dork Mark, and then we let Poppy do what she needs to do."

"You've redone the Dark Mark?" the Director of Magical Law Enforcement asked, more than a little incredulously.

"He teaches all his merry band of idiots how to cast it," Peter said. "Considering the things that we got to in school, not that I'm admitting anything mind you," he said with a grin, "well, I think you can guess that we have some ideas about spell deconstruction and design."

"Just how angry is it going to make him when he sees your version?" she asked, wincing in anticipation of their answer.

"Well, considering some of the things built into it, probably a lot," Peter said. "Tell your people *not* to use the standard Vanishing spells

when they see it, unless they want some rude things about Voldemort floating in the air.” He snorted. “Sirius wrote a dirty limerick.”

“Which one?” Lily asked, amused.

“I rhymed snake, fake and drake, as in the duck,” he said.

“Oh yes,” she said with a laugh. “If he sees that one, he’ll probably single-handedly decimate his ranks just out of anger.” A pause. “Do you really think he has had sexual relations with a duck?”

“Only if he used the Imperius Curse on it first,” Harry said. “That body of his is ... well, you know how some people say that someone is so ugly that they had to tie a pork chop around the person’s neck to get the dog to play with them? Voldemort’s so ugly that even using the whole pig wouldn’t do it.” James snickered softly.

Reluctantly, James said, “I think we should get going,” not wanting this moment of even minor camaraderie with his eldest child to end. “The sooner we get moving, the sooner my grandchild is safe.” He looked at Harry and said, “No matter what, Harry, I will accept this child as my grandchild. I can’t ever make up for the *shit* I put you through, but I can do my best to make sure that I don’t visit that upon your child.”

Harry looked at the man who had fathered him and realised that he was trying very hard. It finally hit him that James Potter really would have been a good father if not for the curse damage. He also realised that he was likely to transmit his problems down to his if he wasn’t careful, and in that moment grew up just a little more. “I understand, and I appreciate it, Dad,” he said carefully.

Silence reigned in the room for a few seconds before James looked at him, not daring to let hope into his eyes. “I can’t say that I’ll ever be completely over what happened,” Harry said, “but I need to let go if I’m going to let you be a proper grandfather to this baby. So, as best I can, I forgive you, and will move on and try to build a relationship with you.” He turned to Sirius. “You don’t mind that I called him Dad, do you?”

“Not in the slightest, son,” Sirius said with a huge grin. “Instead of a dad and a father, now you've got two dads. Now let's get out of here and rescue your baby.”

Amelia Bones walked over and pointed her wand at Harry, waving it in an odd pattern as she murmured. When she put her wand back into its holster, he felt a pull to the south-southeast and began to act fidgety. “I need to be moving,” he said. “Can we get going?”

“I'd say that the charm worked,” Remus said with a smile.

“Can we stop the chatter and save my daughter?” Harry asked irritably. He missed the significant look that passed amongst the others as he left the house and mounted his borrowed broom. When Amelia Bones and all five Marauders had joined him outdoors, with Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Willow coming out with Albus Dumbledore to see them off, Harry began to rise into the air.

Once they were under way, he visibly relaxed. “I'm sorry about in the house,” he said. “I just had to be outside and on my way. I've got this incredible pull that way,” he finished, pointing in the direction he was flying.

As they flew, Lily came up alongside him. “Harry, why did you say that you have a daughter?”

“That just feels right,” he answered her after a little thought. “Never thought about it before the spell, so maybe the spell is giving me some information about my child?”

“Could be,” she agreed. “Any other feelings about her?”

“Spell induced or what I'm thinking myself?”

“Either,” she answered with a slight smile.

“Hard to say. I can't hate the baby – it's not her fault that her mother is a raping psychotic. As much as this child really *is* the child of a Death Eater, I can't hate her for that, either. She's not asking to be born – she simply is. Yeah, maybe it's self-serving to save her in

order to save my own life, but she deserves a chance at *her* own life.” He looked at his mother. “Am I making any sense?”

“Very much, Harry,” she said with a smile that looked as if it should be accompanied by happy tears. “You make me very proud.”

The flight continued for some time, and even with everyone travelling a respectable fifty miles per hour, given the disparity in brooms, it took them roughly four hours before Harry began to be able to triangulate. They landed, and after warming themselves up better than they had been able to on their brooms, they pointed both Harry and the map north, and he pointed, still in a southerly direction, which they carefully marked on the map with a red line. They flew for another twenty minutes and landed again, repeating the manoeuvre, this time drawing the line in yellow. The two lines crossed somewhere near Little Hangleton.

“Well, that strikes me as our proof,” Harry said. “I can give you all a guided tour of the cemetery where my daughter was conceived, if you like,” he said in a voice utterly lacking in mirth, despite the laugh he attempted.

“Let's set one more triangulation point,” Peter said. “I'm betting that he's right, but I want to be sure.” He cast a spell that made the other two lines fade out. “Don't worry, they aren't gone,” he said. “I've just covered them.” They mounted their brooms and took off again.

He could feel the pull getting stronger as they flew closer to the town in question, and he had to fight the urge to turn in the direction of the pull that he felt. Peter noticed this and made them all land, repeating the triangulation one more time and drawing a line in green on the map. When he made the original lines reappear, the proof was inescapably before them. They zoomed the map in as best they could and saw that the lines met on the outskirts of the town of Little Hangleton.

“Let's head to the site in as stealthy a manner as we can manage,” Madam Bones said. “We seem to be fairly close as it is.”

“Make sure you have your Portkeys ready,” James said. “As soon as we grab the psycho girl, Peter will fire off the modified Dork Mark, and

we're heading out to Poppy immediately thereafter.” he looked to Harry. “Please, Harry – when you see our Mark go up, Portkey out.”

Harry looked at James Potter and realised that this was not a teacher expressing concern for his student, or generic adult worry over a child, but a father worried about his son in a situation that the son should never have to be in. It was in that moment that Harry forgave James Potter completely. “I will, Dad,” he said softly.

They flew the remaining few miles in complete silence, using the Gryffindor Quidditch team's hand signals to denote direction changes and speed alterations. While Lily might never have been on the team, she had married their star Chaser. Amelia Bones, they discovered, had been team Captain while at school.

Harry recognised the outskirts of the graveyard and landed outside it. “It's very strong,” he whispered to Madam Bones. “You might need to cancel the charm, or I might cause trouble. I'm nearly going crazy being this close – I want to run out and grab the child, which is more than a little difficult right now.”

“Can you tell which direction she is in, at least?” she asked. He pointed toward the large statue that had been his captor for a time, seven months prior. She nodded and cancelled the spell on Harry, and he sighed in relief as the terrible pulling sensation faded away. The five Marauders slipped away into the graveyard, and it was a tense few minutes before Harry heard some insane giggling and saw a flare shoot into the sky.

It rose and became the Dark Mark, the sickly green skull and ugly snake bright against the sky. It quickly transformed, becoming cartoon-y and shifted into a harlequin head. The snake took on a surprised look as the harlequin blew on its tail as if it were a party favour, especially when the snake's head began to wobble and squeal just like that party favour would, before rolling up toward the face. The snake disappeared and the face opening its mouth as if to deliver a great pronouncement, but instead released a thunderous belch that Harry somehow knew could be heard for miles. Giggling, he followed directions and activated his Portkey back to Hogsmeade.

He was met almost immediately by the soft impact of a female grabbing him to hug him. As he enjoyed the hug, he heard others appear, and he reluctantly disengaged from who he now realised was Hermione. He turned to see the five Marauders appear, Remus and Sirius carrying a semi-conscious Bellatrix Lestrange between them. She was bleeding slightly from her left temple.

"She tripped when she heard us," Lily said with a slight chuckle. "With ice on the ground, she slipped and fell as she turned to face us. We felt it best to make sure she was alright before Portkeying back here."

Poppy Pomfrey came bustling into the room and curled a lip as she caught sight of the pregnant Death Eater. A moment later, Bellatrix was completely unconscious. "We're all safer this way," was the explanation given. "The baby won't be hurt by this spell, either."

"I'm just glad you're all safe," Ginny said, more than a little shakily.

"How did it go?" Ron asked. "You've been gone for hours."

"Almost all of that was flying to the destination," Lily said. "She was staying in a town called Little Hangleton. Once we triangulated her position, it was easier than we expected." She started to giggle. "I know it's childish, but what was done with the Dark Mark was priceless." As his mother lost the ability to speak, Harry explained what he'd seen before leaving, which led to the others laughing as well.

Madam Pomfrey waited for the laughter to subside before starting to chase everyone from the room. "We need to decide about the baby, and that should be a family decision," she said.

Harry scowled. "Um, not to be rude or anything, but shouldn't that be my decision, or at least my parents' decision?" Madam Pomfrey opened her mouth and closed it again quickly before blushing slightly.

"I'm sorry, Mr Black. I'm so used to working at Hogwarts where I need to chase students out all the time that I let myself fall into that here. You are right, of course. Who do you want here for this?"

Willow spoke up. "I need to get back into my research, so I should probably be going. Besides, I have no real stake in this."

"That just might be the best reason of all for you to stay," Harry replied. "You're completely outside all of this thing, so you have no emotional stake in it. That should make you a good choice for listening in."

"Admit it," Willow said. "You just like being surrounded by beautiful women." She grinned at the end of her statement.

Harry looked at her for a moment before smiling in response. "Do I look stupid or something? Don't answer that, by the way," he added quickly as Ron grinned and opened his mouth, making his intended answer fairly obvious. "Personally, I don't have a problem with everyone currently in the house being involved in the conversation."

That settled, Harry started in immediately with what he thought the most important part of the discussion was. "I think that the baby should be delivered by Caesarian section if the baby has a good chance at survival. I believe that the baby will have a greater chance at living if we do it that way, because what I've experienced of her, and what others have told me leads me to think that she would likely kill the baby and possibly even herself if it meant that she could prevent us from harming her Master or his plans."

"The old Belle ..." Sirius reminisced for a moment before shaking his head. "That's neither here nor there. The Belle laying unconscious right here is as bad as Harry says. I agree with him completely. If the baby will survive, then it should be delivered as soon as feasible."

"This is a question I don't like to contemplate," Hermione said with a grimace, "and I don't mean to insult *anyone's* beliefs, but since the question is going to be brought up at some point, I suppose that I ought to be the one to do it -"

"Sounds like you're channelling me, Hermione," Willow laughed.

"You're usually more precise," Lily said. "What are you so worried about?"

Hermione bit her lower lip for a moment before blurting out as a single word, "Should Bellatrix be allowed to survive?" Everyone blinked for a moment as they figured out what she had said, and then nodded.

"Fair question," Madam Pomfrey said. "It did need to be said. I will state, however, that my oath as a Healer will not permit me to let any patient die on the table due to my inactivity. This is not a magical Oath, it is my personal code. If the decision is made to allow her to die, I am afraid that you will not have me to help you. I will not hinder you, but I would not in good conscience be able to assist you."

"I can't speak for anyone else," Harry said, "but I respect that. I'm less than happy ... no, that's not really the word I want to use -"

"Sanguine?" Hermione said softly.

"Yes, that's the one," he said.. "I really don't like the idea of murdering Bellatrix in cold blood, and that's what letting her die on the table would be. Facing her in battle is one thing, but killing an unconscious woman is just wrong."

"I am glad to hear that," the Headmaster said. "That can be quite a slippery slope to begin to slide down."

"Honestly, no matter how crazy my cousin is," Sirius said, "I think that we're agreed that she stays alive after we take the baby." Nods echoed his thoughts.

Harry walked over and hugged Hermione. "You had to ask it, Hermione. Someone would have brought it up, and you were merely the first."

"I just feel ... dirty for even suggesting it," she said. "It's so cold-blooded."

"It makes you wonder if you are any better than the self-styled Lord Voldemort, doesn't it?" Willow asked quietly. Hermione nodded. "The fact that it bothers you should tell you everything you need to know. You're no monster." She walked over and hugged Hermione after Harry disengaged from her, and Hermione settled into the hug for a

moment before she stiffened and gently disengaged. "We'll talk," was all that Willow would say.

"So, what are we doing with Belle after we're done?" Sirius asked.

Madam Pomfrey looked at him with a curious expression on her face. "You said 'the old Belle' earlier, Sirius. What did you mean?"

"I got along with all three of my cousins until they hit around fourth year at Hogwarts. That's when Belle and Cissy each changed into the bigoted bitches that they are today. I've never known what happened."

"Did Andromeda undergo that as well?"

"No. She was excommunicated from the family," he replied. "I know that's not the word for what was done, but it certainly was how my family acted."

"Did the other two have marriage or betrothal contracts?" James asked suddenly.

"Probably," Sirius replied. "Why?"

"Can you lay hands on those things?" James asked, ignoring the question.

"Sure. The Blacks would have ensured that we had a copy to make sure that Malfoy and Lestrangle held up their end of the bargain. You obviously have an idea, so I think I'll Floo to 12 Grimmauld and see if I can locate them." A flash of green later and he was gone.

"What are you thinking, Fath ... Dad?" Harry asked.

James lit up. "You have no idea how much that means to me, Harry," he said thickly.

"I'm about to become a father," Harry said with a wry smile. "I think I'm starting to get an idea. Plus, I need to learn forgiveness, and it wasn't exactly as if you had any real control over what you were doing because of that curse." He scowled. "I'm not saying that I won't

backslide and call you names and complain about growing up the way I did, but I want little Amanda to have a happy relationship with her grandfather.”

Hermione gasped as she heard the name and tears filled her eyes as her hands shot to her mouth. “That's so beautiful!” she finally managed to say, her voice full of emotion.

“I thought it was a good choice myself,” Harry said with a smile. He looked at the puzzled expressions on Ron, Ginny and Willow's faces and said, “The name I chose has Latin origins and means 'worthy of love' or 'worthy of being loved'. I don't even know her and I love her already, and with a conception like she had, I thought I'd make a statement with the name, as well.”

The fireplace flared again, and Sirius came through, looking bemused. “That should be interesting,” he finally said. “I wrested control of the house from my mother's picture, and as soon as I did, the damn painting fell off the wall! Kreacher squeaked and fell over dead, and ... well, I went into the den, where the contracts should have been stored, and found them sitting very nicely on a table.” He handed them to James.

James thumbed through the contracts for a long moment and then called Professor Dumbledore over. The two men murmured together for a minute or so before James stood up and said, “Sirius, at your soonest opportunity, you will need to officially repudiate the marriage contract with Bellatrix. I'd say to do the same with Narcissa, but you'd be on much shakier ground with that one. But the contract has a phrase that the wife, Bellatrix in this case, must support her husband in all things. She has to honour and obey him. Now, Rudolphus was a Death Eater and went *willingly* to prison. He was always a nasty little shite, pardon my language. She may well have been forced by the contract to become what we all know and hate.”

Madam Pomfrey grinned. “I have an idea that goes quite well, I think, with repudiating the contract, since I doubt that the old Bellatrix that Sirius describes would likely handle what has happened the past several years very well. There is a treatment called Therapeutic Obliviation, which is used in situations where a person simply can not

handle a certain situation, but has not had a complete mental breakdown. The memories of the time in question are removed. In this case, we could *Oblivate* her memory of everything since she became subject to the contract. We could then give her a crash course in all her spell-work, and try to bring her to back as a productive member of society.”

Dumbledore said, “Personally, that would be my choice, were it my decision, but I have a known bias toward thinking the best of people and situations.”

“I hate to say this,” Ginny said, “but the decision should probably be Harry’s, since if it works, he’d be spending a lot of time with her, since she *is* the mother of his child.” The adults in the room nodded.

Harry thought for a long moment before he began slowly. “I think that Professor Dumbledore has infected me with his optimism. If we have a chance to return her to a state where she can then become someone who ... I want her to be less psycho. I want Amanda to know her mother, not hear about how crazy she is. If this Therapeutic Obliviation will work, then I think we should do it.”

“Would it cause problems if it was done before ... well, if Sirius Repudiated the contract and then the Obliviation is done, there might not be a need for a C-section,” Hermione said.

Madam Pomfrey tilted her head back, obviously thinking deeply about what Hermione suggested. “The problem is, she’ll be fourteen mentally. How would you have felt two years ago if you had awakened one morning and discovered yourself seven months pregnant?”

“Good point,” Hermione conceded. “Can we at least reset her hormones afterwards? Otherwise, she’ll be lactating, which will lead her to question what has happened.”

“That much is a given,” Madam Pomfrey said. “Now what needs -” She was stopped as Willow’s cell phone rang.

The red-head chuckled a little nervously as she saw the number of wands suddenly pointed at her waist. She looked at the group and

carefully reached for her telephone. Looking at the number displayed, she activated it and said, "Yes sir? What can I do for you?"

The speaker was loud enough that the others could hear the other side of the conversation. "I'm just calling to see if we can't convince you to come home for New Year's Eve, Willow," Xander Harris was heard to say. "I'll even make sure there's a private jet to pick you up."

"You shouldn't go to all that effort for me," she replied.

"You know I'll go to the ends of the earth for my friends," he replied simply, making her tear up slightly. "Tell you what – if you decide to, you can even bring some of your British friends with you. We can have them back before school restarts for them."

"Hermione is wincing at that thought," she said. "It seems that they can hear your side of the conversation as well."

"Ron and Harry probably don't have passports," Hermione said, and both Ron and Harry looked confused. "I thought so. I can't imagine that we'd be able to get passports for them in less than a day."

Dumbledore spoke up. "I may be able to do something about it. How soon would he need to know?"

"The sooner, the better," came the voice from the phone.

"How likely are these to be checked closely?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not very," said Hermione and Xander at the same time.

"Excellent," Dumbledore replied. "Do you happen to have yours with you, Miss Granger?" She smiled and pulled out her passport. "Again, excellent. Are you conversant in what changes would need to be made for those people who would be travelling, other than the obvious names and photographs?" She nodded. "Then if it is agreed that people will be travelling to the United States, temporary passports can be procured for them that will last for at least a week."

"All I need to know now is how many people will be coming to Sunnydale with you, Willow," said Xander in what even the low audio quality could not hide as being a hopeful tone.

She looked around in curiosity, and was met with several amused looks. "I suppose that it's up to them. Can I call you back in a few minutes, Mr ... Xander?"

"Talk to you in just a few minutes then, Willow." The call ended with a somewhat amused sounding Xander Harris hanging up.

"Well, we'll need to talk to the Weasleys, but I'm betting that if we send at least one adult, they'll agree," Lily said.

The private jet landed in Sunnydale after a long trip. Everyone stretched once again as they stood, and Harry took a moment to enjoy it as he watched Ginny's, Hermione's and Willow's shirts tighten momentarily. He chuckled to note that Ron was doing the same to Sienna, and Sirius wasn't even trying to hide his enjoyment of Lily's figure. James Junior looked mildly annoyed that there was no female that struck his fancy on the plane, but there was also an amused smile there.

The pilot came out in his Xtech uniform and smiled at the group. "We'll be debarking in a few minutes, as soon as they get the stairs over here. I'd like to welcome the group of you to California, by the way, and I hope you enjoy the New Years party."

"Thank you," Lily said. They heard a slight clanging against the hull of the aircraft, and then two sharp thumps against the door. The pilot smiled and opened the door, and the passengers were surprised by the inflow of heat. "Good heavens!" Lily exclaimed. "It's nearly New Years and it's this warm?"

"Welcome to California!" said a tall brown-haired man with warm brown eyes which were currently twinkling with mirth.

Willow walked forward to introduce them, but was surprised to be pulled into a hug by the brown-haired man. She stiffened for a

moment before relaxing into it a little, but she soon started to cry. "Just kill me if I ever abuse your friendship again," she finally hiccuped. "It'll be kinder."

A leggy blonde entered the jet next, putting a hand on Willow's back. "My sister said the same thing when it finally hit home with her. Welcome back, Willow."

"I don't deserve you guys," was the response.

"Who would escape a whipping?" Xander said. As Willow looked at him with a curious expression, he grinned and said, "Hey, I read the classics. I just didn't like them!" which made Willow laugh.

She went serious suddenly. "I want to say this in front of witnesses, Mr ... Xander." She stood straighter and said, "I owe you more than I can ever say. You were there for me even when I didn't want to admit it. I abused you, and you would have been ... well, you'd have been right to hold the grudge against me as you've done against people who deserved it less than I did, but really deserved it, mind you."

"Vintage Willow," he said with a smile.

"We missed our friend," Dawn said. "We should leave this jet and actually introduce our British friends to Sunny California." She grinned and stood by the doorway. As Willow walked over to exit, she adopted a perky demeanour and said, "Welcome to California! I hope you enjoy your stay." As Willow walked down the stairs, laughing, she repeated this for everyone who walked by her, including Xander and the pilot as they exited the plane.

They were quickly taken to where they were staying – a very nice apartment complex called the Hillview Apartments, although Harry was less than impressed with the hills that they supposedly had a view of. He'd begun to feel a little on edge as soon as he'd set foot on the tarmac at the airport, and he simply did not know why.

Since they had managed to sleep on the flight over, it was decided that they'd be given a tour of the place that they were visiting. Harry began to fidget more as they travelled, but doing his best to not let it show.

As they drove past a place where it seemed that the party would be centred, Harry's eyes were drawn to a blonde woman in an Xtech uniform. Looking at her, he felt both repulsed and drawn to her. "Do you know who she is?" he asked, pointing out the window of the slow moving vehicle.

They looked, and Willow laughed. "Geez, Harry, you set your sights high! First you see me naked and now you're looking ..." She rolled down the window and yelled, "Yo! Buffy! Get your butt over here!"

The blonde spun to face the car, started in happy surprise, but immediately turned to someone else and spoke a few words. Another member of the Xtech team, who looked as if he'd seen better days, came over and obviously relieved her at her post, which allowed her to run over to the car at a surprising speed, as far as Harry was concerned.

She skidded to a stop by the now stopped vehicle and asked, "How long are you back for, Willow?"

"I head back to England after the party is over, but I ... it means a lot to Xander if we're here to enjoy the first New Years party for the town in a hundred and sixty-four years." Her eyes filled with sadness. "And I've let him down too many times before to do it now. I'll die before I knowingly do it again." Her eyes had moved to lock with Xander's as she said it.

"The same for me, Willow," Buffy said softly. She shook her head. "So, who are the others you've corralled to come with you?"

"Why don't we get out so that I can take a look at how things are progressing for the party?" Xander asked. They emptied the vehicle, and the man who had relieved Buffy looked carefully as he walked over to meet them. "Mr Harris," he said in a soft voice that carried menace.

"I know you're on duty, Ian, but you can still call me Xander."

"I know, Mr Harris. Doing so doesn't set a good example for the new employees, though."

Xander rolled his eyes, but smiled and began to walk around the town's small park, leaving the group with Dawn, Willow and Buffy, since Ian chose to follow Xander. "So when are you signing on as Slayer back-up?" Dawn asked.

"Never," Buffy responded. "To accept that kind of pay for doing the same things that ... by rights, Dawn, with the crap I pulled, you should be an only child now. I won't accept pay for running the risk of turning back into the self-centred little ... there are kids present, so I won't use the best words to describe what I am."

Harry turned to his parents and friends. "Am I that bad when I get in those moods? That rant sounded awfully familiar." He received a number of amused nods.

He turned back to Buffy. "Miss Summers? Harry James Potter Black, and I'm the guy your friend is studying."

"I'd say you were doing the studying just before Christmas," Willow said with a sly grin. At Buffy's confused look, both at the comment and Harry's sudden blush, she explained. "Sexy there walked in on me in the shower."

Buffy looked at Harry for a long moment. "You let him live? When's the wedding?" she finally said with a smile.

"Well, when he locked himself in his room and offered such a heartfelt apology ... he honestly felt that his accident had violated me. So I told him to enjoy."

Buffy looked at him again, making him even more uncomfortable than he had been between the aura that the town had and the odd aura that he was getting from her. "What's wrong?" she asked as she saw him squirm.

"I don't know," he answered with a scowl. "I don't like this town, and I don't know why. It's a nice looking place and I can't see any reason why it gets on my nerves. It's just gotten worse as we've come from the Hillside Apartments. Then there's the fact that something about you ... this sounds wrong, but there's a similar feeling about you, as if maybe whatever this is that's bugging me has touched you to your

soul." He thought deeply for a minute before continuing, thinking out loud rather than paying attention to his surroundings. "Then there's the fact that being male, I find you and Willow *very* attractive, and it gets weird. You attract me, but repel me at the same time." He focused on her again, and noticed the odd look on her face. "What?"

Hermione laughed. "You were thinking out loud, Harry. You just told Miss Summers what you think of her."

Buffy laughed as Harry turned white. "You all can call me Buffy," she said. "And as for you -" she said, turning to Harry.

"My apologies, Miss Summers," he said formally. "I seem to have a built in ability to do the wrong thing around the ladies from this town. Please forgive my crass comments."

She looked at Willow. "I see what you mean, Wills. A girl could lose her heart to a charmer like this one."

He scowled as he heard that. "Okay, I want it found and bound as soon as possible. I can not accept that this is a natural phenomenon."

"What are you talking about?" Ginny asked, more than a little puzzled.

"You, Hermione, the Quidditch girls, Cho, the Patils, and even my sister have stated that I do things to their hormones, some of them making the point quite interestingly. I walk in on a woman who should have rightfully hurt me as soon as possible, as others state she would have done, but instead she tells me to enjoy. Now I meet a woman that I tell to her face that she both attracts and repels me, and she states that she could lose her heart to someone as charming as I am? I am not that charming! It's a magical effect, and I want it stopped!" There was power rolling almost visibly off him, and the grass was actually blowing away from him in all directions.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," said a cultured British voice from behind him. As Harry spun to face him, the wind that had formed died as suddenly as it had risen. "Rupert Giles at your service," he said. "Most people simply call me Giles."

"Yes sir," Harry said. "Why do you say that it would be a bad idea?"

"Well, your Headmaster was the one who contacted me about researching something in regards to your situation. I have knowledge that there is a Prophecy with a capital P in regards to you and your so called Dark Lord Voldemort." He pronounced it without the letter T, making it sound quite French, and then paused. "Flight of death? What idiot named him?"

"It comes from his name, Tom Marvolo Riddle. Comes out to 'I am Lord Voldemort'," Harry replied. "I suppose it's scarier than Tromedlov or Vmootlerd," he added with a laugh. "He named himself."

"Vmootlerd?" Sirius asked around his characteristic barking laugh.

"Well, if he can play with the letters, so can I," Harry answered with a shrug.

"Yes, well," interjected the slightly smiling Giles. "I fear for binding any of your power, because you may well need whatever you have as the final means to defeat this Lord Vmootlerd," he finished with a slight laugh.

"Still," Harry said, "I seem to be affecting women that I normally wouldn't. Be honest, Mr Giles – what fifteen year old has any hopes of catching the eye of any woman like Willow or Buffy? They're what, five or six years older than me?"

"Try nine," Willow said softly. "Buff and I are nine years your senior."

"Please tell me that I don't do anything for you, romantically speaking?" he pleaded to both of the Sunnydale ladies.

"You intrigue me," Buffy said. "And as for the other, well, I had a boyfriend who was older than me when I was around your age. I can't very well say that you can't have a girlfriend my age without being a hypocrite."

"But you aren't actually interested, right?" he asked hopefully.

"You're intriguing. Enough so that if the situation were right, I might contemplate it. That's the best I can say right now. Sorry if it doesn't help you."

Willow shrugged. "Who can say? You're cute, and I was seeing someone under-age for a while. No, I'm not about to look for a place to sneak off with you right now, so that should help your mental health, but hey, who knows what might happen?"

Harry hung his head. "See what I mean, though?" he said to Giles. "Most women when faced with this situation would smile and either laugh at me or find some way of saying 'Thanks but no thanks'. That's not the case here, and there's something wrong."

"Well, to be fair," Dawn said with a smile, "it's not a fair choice. Hell, I think you're intriguing, but you do nothing for me. Xander does all that for me." Her eyes sparkled wickedly.

"TMI!" both Willow and Buffy shouted at the same time, laughing as they covered their ears. "Way TMI!" All three girls started to laugh.

"TMI?" James asked.

"Too Much Information," Lily answered helpfully. "Usually used when you've just heard something said that you could just as easily have done without knowing. It tends to be used humorously." James nodded.

Xander returned about then. "Things look good for the party. Anything of interest happen over here? I heard Buffy and Willow shouting 'TMI' about something."

"Our sex life," Dawn replied, eyes still sparkling madly. Xander simply blushed slightly.

"Yes, well, I think we should continue our tour of the town," Xander finally said, valiantly attempting to pretend that the end of the previous conversation had not happened. His blush gave the lie to that, however. "Maybe take them to the school, to show them the place we all finally escaped from?"

"That's in walking distance," Giles said. "Do you mind if I join you?"

A few moments later, the group, larger by the addition of Buffy, Ian and Giles began walking down the street. Harry began to get

progressively more unsettled as they approached their destination, and when they turned a corner and were faced with a building that by design simply had to be a school, he stopped in his tracks.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Sienna asked as she came up next to him. "You're vibrating."

"This town is bad enough, but that building -" He stared at it for a long moment before looking to Buffy. "That's the same darkness that's in you. You've been touched by that ... that *thing* over there."

"That was where I graduated from," she said simply. "I kinda expect I would have been touched by my high school."

"We were all a little touched after finishing at *that* school," Xander quipped.

"No!" Harry said. "I don't mean ... oh, I don't know what I mean, but I will admit that I really wish I knew some massive explosive hexes. I'd clear that thing out of there if I could."

Dawn looked at him with a calculating gaze. "You've been getting progressively sharper tongued, more uneasy, and angrier as we've approached the school. When we were driving, every time we were aimed this way, the reactions got worse, but would lessen if the route led away."

"Could Harry be sensing the Hellmouth?" Willow asked incredulously. She turned to Harry quickly. "Not trying to leave you out of the conversation, but I don't think you know what the Hellmouth is and it would probably take too long to explain it but if you are you've just given us something very interesting to look at and study and maybe learn how to replicate and I'm doing it again, aren't I?" she finally finished, looking more than a little embarrassed at the vintage Willow verbal explosion.

Buffy chuckled. "Which is worse – the fact that you did that, or that we all understood you?"

Xander looked at Harry. "I have something to ask of you, and you don't even have to consider it if you don't want to." As Harry looked at

him in curiosity, he continued, "I'd like to take you to the Hellmouth itself, and see what you can tell us."

"Do you want it closed?" Harry asked.

"Yes and no," Xander said. "If it gets closed, then we just find one erupting somewhere else in the world. What I'd love to do is figure out how to seal it. I've got some good friends and even a couple employees who need this thing around. Well, *want* is a better term for it. As they described it, it's sort of like living in Siberia all your life and then moving to a pleasant tropical island. They are classified as demons, but they're either just out to live a normal life or are actively good guys. Like I said, a couple of 'em work for me."

"So closing it is bad for multiple reasons," Harry said. Xander nodded. He bit his lower lip for a moment before saying, "All right, take me to it. I can't promise that you'll be able to keep me there, but I'm at least willing to try to stand near it and see what I can tell you about the thing." He stopped, closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, not noticing that Xander had pulled out his phone and called someone.

"We'll have a team here in a minute," Xander said as he hung up. "We'll have the principal of the school here as well, to actually let us in."

A few moments later, a van pulled up and six people climbed out, five of them in Xtech uniforms and the sixth having body language that somehow screamed both 'school official' and 'one of the most dangerous men you'll ever meet' at the same time. The dangerous non-Xtech man walked over and shook Xander's hand. "So, you need to see the Hellmouth for some reason? My name is Robin Woods, by the way."

"Does everyone in this town know about this thing?" Lily asked incredulously.

"No, just those of us who have dealt with it," Buffy answered. She looked at the team and said, "That's Gamma team, but there's no Slayer with them. I thought it was a requirement that a team go out with a Slayer."

"We have a Slayer with us," Xander said quietly.

She blinked for a moment. "No. I am not working for Xtech as a Slayer in this town."

"You deserve the job, Buffy," Dawn said quietly.

"No, I don't," came the reply in a tone that rather seriously ended that conversation.

"Well, Faith is out of town on vacation, and the others have all moved elsewhere. None of our S.I.T.s are ready for this, so you're it for the moment, Buffy," Xander said. "We need you as a Slayer for at least this mission. Please?" She scowled at him for a long moment before nodding. "Good. The mission is simple. We're escorting Mr Black here down to see the Hellmouth. Other than his getting really antsy and probably irritable, nothing should happen. If it does, or he seems to be having a bad reaction to being that close, I want the team to grab him and get him away as fast as possible. I want him to see himself walking in, that's how fast I want him removed."

"If I have to, I'll fling him over my shoulder and run," Buffy said simply. At Harry's puzzled look, she asked, "May I?" When he nodded, she grabbed him and easily flipped him over her shoulder and did a quick jog around the group. She set him down and noticed that he was blushing bright red. "What? Did my pants fall off or something?"

"No, my hand was ... uh -"

She laughed. "Your hand was pinned and you had no way of moving it off my boob. Trust me, if the same thing happens when we visit the Hellmouth, you won't be worrying about whether or not I'm going to be angry over an accidental feel." She clapped his shoulder. "At least you didn't try to squeeze."

"It would be rude, first off," he said, "and given the strength you just showed, I'd like to keep all my internal organs internal, thank you very much."

Buffy spun on Willow. "You've been telling tales, haven't you?"

"I told him that it was the old Buffy!" Willow said with a small laugh.

Harry suddenly got an evil grin and looked to the somewhat embarrassed redhead. "So, do you envy me now Willow?" Buffy turned to face him, rather obviously confused. "Well, she said that I'd be the envy of a lot of people, her included, if I ever got a chance to ride you." He was blushing slightly, but the grin stayed and turned impudent. Willow turned bright red and tried to pretend that she wasn't there, while the rest of the group started laughing. "Seriously, she did say that it was the Buffy that she went to school with that would have ripped out my heart over that. I think she said Xander would have gone for the spleen, but that's just because he's weird." He started as he realised that he'd just called his host something that might make him angry.

Xander shrugged. "What? It's true."

"Trust me," the principal said, "Willow spoke nothing but the unvarnished truth. Xander is weird." The man grinned impudently at Xander.

"No matter how much you sweet talk me, Robin, my heart belongs to Dawn," came the response, which drew laughter.

As they talked, they headed deeper into the school, both inside and downward. They reached the basement and headed toward a somewhat rougher area that looked as if the workmen building that section had just not bothered to do more than what the minimum requirements were in order to keep the upper floors from attempting to reach an equilibrium point with gravity. Harry was beginning to squint. "Must you keep it so dark down here?" he asked irritably.

"Side effect of the Hellmouth," came Xander's response after a pause of a few seconds. "We're almost there."

They finally entered a room, where Harry saw a visible disk in the floor that seemed to throw off angry red and orange sparks, with a swirl of similar red and orange and even the occasional yellow sparks spiralling in toward the centre.

Harry looked at it in anger, and threw his hands out in front of himself as if bracing for a hard impact with a wall. Instead of an impact, which would have been difficult at best with no wall before him, a blast of pure white light exploded out of him and hit the spinning disk. He felt himself shuddering, and then losing consciousness. As he faded, he felt himself lifted, and his hand landed in the same place that it had during the demonstration. *Damn, why couldn't she be in a bikini?* was the mildly disjointed thought he had just before completely fading.

He awoke in what could only be a hospital room. "Damn," he grumbled softly. "Can't even go on vacation without ending up in the hospital wing."

"Given what you did, I'm not surprised you were exhausted," came Xander's voice from beside him.

Harry looked up and tried to focus on the man, but realised that he needed his glasses. They were placed into his hands, and he quickly brought everything into focus, finally. Xander was looking bemused. "What happened?"

"I'd like to know the same thing. You managed to seal the Hellmouth without closing it. The demons in town say that they can feel the difference, but that it's a good one. How'd you do it?"

"Beats me. I just ... what did I do?"

"I was hoping you knew. Pity." Xander paused for a moment. "I know something of the problem you've got, what with that prophecy hanging over your head, and I'm thinking that you're at one hell of a disadvantage with absolutely needing glasses. What do you think about sticking around for a day or two and getting some laser surgery on your eyes?"

"Laser surgery?" Harry asked with a puzzled tone.

"Well, what I'm about to tell you sounds a lot worse than it actually is," Xander said. "They'll first likely do an eye exam to make sure that they have your prescription correct. The next thing that they'll do,

assuming that you're a viable candidate, will be to put you in a chair, anaesthetise your eyes, and very carefully use concentrated beams of light to reshape your corneas. You'll have even worse vision for about a day, but your vision should be fine after everything is done."

"Sounds a little scary, to be honest. But you really think it will help me?"

"Well, since it's probably fairly safe to assume that there are no spells to permanently fix your vision in your wizarding world, it certainly couldn't hurt."

"How do you know that there aren't?" Harry asked, surprised that Xander seemed to be speaking with such certainty.

"You still wear glasses," was the simple reply. Harry could only nod at that.

"How quickly could we get me checked out for that? It would be kinda nice to be able to see without needing glasses."

Xander grinned. "It just so happens that you are at Xtech, and we've got what's necessary to do it all. So, if you don't mind, I'll send in the eye doc to get things going. Well, the folks, too, just so they know you're still alive."

Chapter 18

"It's time."

With these words, everything changed. The crowd had been walking around, talking and generally enjoying themselves, but it was as if those simple words, said to Xander Harris by his fiancée, had lit a fuse in the crowd that set off a silence bomb. It was almost eerily quiet by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs leading up to the platform.

"Was it something I said?" he asked as he looked out on the expectant crowd. A few people laughed, and the aura became somewhat less tense. "We're about to ring in 1996 at this party, and it sure sounds like you people are enjoying yourselves out there."

"Thank you for helping make this a safer town!" someone yelled from the crowd.

"I just run a private security company," Xander scoffed. "Thank the police for the job that they've done, and for allowing us to help them when we can. Without the police in this town, we'd still be hiding in our houses on the holidays."

As the crowd began to applaud, Harry could see that Xander didn't exactly believe what he was saying, but he noticed that the town's residents didn't see that. He was a little bothered by this, and decided to ask him when it was safer to do so. But Xander was speaking again.

"We've got about forty-five minutes before midnight, so I'm going to turn this back over to the people you really want to listen to, the deejays." Xander turned and bowed floridly to the woman behind the microphone, who laughed and picked the music back up.

Harry looked around again and realised that people were pairing off to welcome the year in. Dawn hooked her arm into Xander's as they headed toward Harry and his family and friends. Ron seemed finally to have gathered the courage to talk to Sienna, and they looked fairly

friendly, given the fact that she seemed to have taken hold of his hand, and he'd made no effort to get it back. He blinked as he looked at Hermione, who was dancing with Willow, and there seemed to be some electricity sparking between them, given that he'd have had trouble sliding a credit card between them. He winced slightly, realising that she'd finally made a choice, and it didn't seem to involve him. Ginny and James Junior seemed to be getting along quite well at the moment.

He turned and found himself faced with Buffy Summers. "How you doin'?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I know that we're mere minutes away from the new year, and I should be happy, but all I can think of right now is that it feels as if Yeats was right. 'Turning and turning in the widening gyre the falcon cannot hear the falconer; things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned; the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.' Does proximity to that Hellmouth cause that sort of feeling in someone?"

"Quite often. It's a weird feeling around here, and those times I've been away, it felt good to be gone. You like the classical stuff, I see. Talk to Willow; I'll bet she'll enjoy a conversation with someone who actually understands Yeats and Keats and Kipling."

"Probably why she's over talking to Hermione at the moment." He looked over as he spoke and saw that they had moved closer now that it was a slow dance. "Okay, so talking is low on their list of things to do right now," he said.

"Which one of the two are you sweet on?" Buffy asked.

"I'd have to say both, but more so Hermione, because I've known her longer."

"And it's a little depressing to see her smooching another girl?"

"Not the girl part, but it tells me that she's made her decision. She'd pulled away from me this last summer because she'd stopped being

the woman that she usually is, and was far more sexual than usual. She wanted to back away from everyone to get her some time to settle. I'm sad that it wasn't me that she chose, but I am glad that she seems happy at the moment. That's the most important thing to me. Well, right behind getting Voldemort off my arse."

Buffy smiled. "Care to dance in the new year then, Harry? Everyone else seems to have paired off, and here's you and me being alone together. Shall we at least enjoy being alone together?"

"Who am I to turn down an invitation such as that from a beautiful woman?" he said with a laugh, and they began to dance a medium speed dance. She kept him close when the next song turned slow and romantic.

"Hey, doesn't mean we're starting anything," she said. "Just means I don't want to leave the floor just yet." He nodded, and enjoyed the feeling of dancing with a beautiful woman.

The music stopped about three minutes before midnight, and Xander remounted the stage. "Well, we're getting to that time, folks! People have decided that they want me to do the countdown, since Dick Clark is booked in New York City, so can we have the countdown clock start when we're at two minutes 'til? That should give me plenty of time to blather up here and generally make a fool of myself -"

"So what else is new?" yelled someone from the crowd.

"Yes, thank you Dawn," he replied with a smirk as the crowd laughed. "Just for that, I'm bringing you up here on stage with me." He jumped down and carried his fiancée up onto the stage with him, with her theatrically beating on his back.

"Would it be out of place for me to think that she's got a really cute bum?" Harry murmured to Buffy.

"That's my sister you're ogling," was the amused reply.

"I'll take that as a yes, then," he answered back with a small laugh.

"Nah, she's only got eyes for Xander," Buffy said. She looked at him. "Don't take this wrong, but would you mind enacting a New Years tradition with me?"

"Depends," he answered with an impudent grin. "Does it end with me broken into little pieces scattered across the park?"

"No," she replied, the laughter evident.

"Then I'm game. What's it involve?"

"A kiss for luck to bring in the new year. You start the kiss just before the clock strikes midnight, and stop after. Brings luck and maybe even romance, it's said."

"I'm a little young for you," he replied.

"Well, it doesn't mean romance with the person you're kissing, although that's the usual thought. But I think we both could use some in our lives."

He nodded and they watched as the clock started and counted down. At fifteen seconds to midnight, she took his face into her hands and moved closer, giving him a chance to back out. He leaned forward to meet her, their lips meeting at seven seconds to midnight.

The kiss broke at one minute and nineteen seconds after midnight, and Harry stared at her in surprise. He could feel a certain portion of his anatomy pulsing against her somewhat insistently and hoped she wouldn't comment. His mouth was still open from when she had pried it open with her tongue, and he stared at her agog. "Holy cow," he breathed. "That was ... uh ... wow!"

"I can guess that you liked it, the way you were returning it," she said with a smirk, not releasing him. "Something else tells me you liked that kiss, too."

He shook his head. "If that's how you kiss normally, I don't think I'd survive if I ever became your boyfriend. But damn, what a way to go!"

"That was an impressive one, Buffy," Dawn said with some amusement.

"First live one, though," Buffy said with a laugh upon realising that the only ones in range to hear it were her friends. Harry just blinked at the comment. "I have a history of necrophilia, as a good friend once told me. One vampire is an aberration, but two was a lifestyle choice. A choice I have decided is in my worst interests." She frowned for a moment. "I apologise if that kiss made you think that ... well -"

"I was returning it with equal fervour, Buffy. I should apologise for that."

"Why not just say that you were enjoying the hell out of kissing the new year in, and leave it at that?" Dawn asked with a laugh.

Harry turned to look at her with mock-horror in his eyes. "But then there would be no angsty denials of ..." He turned to Buffy. "What exactly are we denying?"

Buffy laughed uproariously, and Harry had to admit that it seemed to do pleasant things to her chest. "Xander, you've corrupted another one!" she finally gasped out.

"No, you can blame my two dads for that," Harry quipped, and turned as he heard a sniff behind him. He turned to see Lily wiping at her eyes and both Sirius and James with suspiciously wet eyes. "What?" he asked. Lily laughed, crying even harder at his question.

"It's the fact that you don't know that makes it mean so much," James said thickly. "I'm sure that I don't deserve it."

He turned back to the Sunnydale crew, puzzled, to see Xander shaking his head in amusement, and both Dawn and Buffy were now sniffing. He shrugged. "So, what next?"

"Well," Xander said, "you need to have the laser surgery done on your eyes before you go back. I figure that we do it today, which will give you the rest of the day to heal, and all of tomorrow, and then you can fly back home on either the third or the fourth."

"That works. Then we get to worry about -" His comment drifted into nothing as he stared into space for a moment, a frown on his face. Suddenly, he got a look of intense annoyance and smacked himself in the forehead. "Idiot! All that talk for nothing!"

"What are you talking about?" Lily asked.

"Bellatrix! We're so worried about her waking up with the mind of a fourteen year old teenager and hiding as much of the past several years from her that we forgot that she's going to have a permanent reminder of her past." As the others looked at him, puzzled, he held up his right hand. "Her right hand is that silver thing that Riddle gave her. We should give her the choice on Amanda, whether to deliver her immediately, or carry her the remaining two months."

"This is the woman who ... got herself pregnant by you for some ritual purpose?" Dawn asked.

"That's a long story that we can explain elsewhere," Lily said as the crowd began to get louder, the party finally kicking into full swing.

Willow sat back in the first class seat, smiling as she looked at Harry. "You really impressed Xander," she said. "That's not the easiest thing to do."

"But I don't understand why he's impressed!" Harry argued. "The Bellatrix who did all that was forced to be that way by a magical contract. Why should I hold all that old stuff against Belle, as Sirius calls her?"

"You may never understand," Lily said, "and that doesn't bother me. Just know that I love you and am prouder of you than I thought possible." Harry's face lit up at those words, and he walked over and hugged his mother.

They landed in London actually ahead of their planned time and were quickly back in Hogsmeade. "Harry!" Albus Dumbledore said in happy surprise. "You no longer need glasses?"

"They've got this surgery that can be done. It was done on the first, and I'm pretty good now. It'll be time to be back at school before I'm really sure everything is good, but I was told that if I haven't seen problems by now, I'm not likely to."

He walked into the family room. "I think we need everyone here. I have a decision that needs to be made. I have my thoughts on it, but I want discussion."

"You know our point of view, Harry," James said. "We support you in this."

"To what do you refer, Harry?" Albus Dumbledore asked.

"Should we *Oblivate* her?" was Harry's simple response. "We'll have to explain to her why she's pregnant, or dealing with the aftermath, at least, and why her hand is solid silver. No matter what, Sirius will be dissolving the Lestrangle marriage contract, so her personality might change. I think we should dissolve the contract and then wake her, and offer her the choice. If she's been twisted by her time with Voldemort, we perform the Obliviation. If she *asks* to be *Obliviated*, we do it. But we offer her the chance."

"My boy, you continually make me proud," Dumbledore said happily.

"How do you think *I* feel? He's *my* son!" Lily asked, thrusting out her chest in pride. Harry was amused to note Willow's eyes widening and her pupils dilating. Her blouse seemed slightly tighter as well.

"Indeed, and you have ample reason to feel that way about him. Let me contact Poppy and we can get this out of the way today. Sirius?"

"Yes. I did some research on how to do the dissolution, and she needs to be conscious for it, so we can expect some foul language from her. A well-placed *Silencio* should deal with that, however."

"Physical bindings," Harry said. "We'll need to hold Bellatrix down until we can bring Belle back."

"A beautiful way of separating the personalities, Harry," Dumbledore said. "And indeed, you are correct." He walked to the fireplace and

spoke to Madam Pomfrey, who arrived a few minutes later, bag in hand.

"I am also proud of you, Harry," she said. "Someone who has been through what you have could easily have become bitter. I suppose that we should begin."

The group consisting of Sirius, Madam Pomfrey and Harry entered the room. Albus followed and created strong bonds to hold her down after conferring with Madam Pomfrey for a moment. After that, a Silencing Charm was placed, followed by waking Bellatrix. Sirius was carrying the contract, a quill and an inkwell.

Consciousness returned to her eyes, as well as the madness. She began to yell and curse at them, but her words were swallowed by the charm. "Shut up," Sirius said. "As your head of family, I demand it." She stopped ranting at his words, and looked at him, anger marring her face now. "As Head of Family Black, I hereby officially repudiate the marriage contract between Rudolphus Angelus Lestrangle and Bellatrix Cassiopeia Black. Rudolphus has broken the contract by openly becoming a Death Eater and causing a member of the Black family to go to prison, thereby tarnishing the family name. I, Sirius Orion Black, Head of Family Black, repudiate this contract." He dipped the quill in the ink and wrote 'REPUDIATED' across the front, and signed his name beneath the word he had just written. A bright flash filled the room.

When their eyesight returned, they found Bellatrix crying on the bed she was strapped to. The Silencing Charm was dropped, and she was released from her bonds. To everyone's surprise, Harry was the first one to her, and she rolled and threw her arms around him, sobbing. "I don't deserve to live after everything I've done!" were the first coherent words from her.

"Ballocks," Harry responded. "You're Belle again, aren't you?"

She sniffed deeply. "How can you even stand to be near me? I raped you!"

He thought for a moment. "No, Bellatrix Lestrange did that. Belle Black is a woman who is obviously quite sorrowful about her actions when she was Bellatrix."

"How can you be so ... so -"

"Understanding?" Sirius asked. "Wonderful? Forgiving? It's just the way that Harry is."

"Plus, he looked at how I treated him his first fourteen years and decided to do the opposite, now that he's going to be a father."

Belle had been about to respond, but her eyes shot back to Harry, wide. "Even after ... you want the baby?"

"I even have a name picked out, and now that the Belle that Sirius knew seems to be back, you can decide if you like it. What do you think of Amanda?"

"It sounds pretty. I guess it's alright," was the puzzled response.

"Given what it means, I'm wondering if we should call *you* Amanda until the baby is born. It means 'worthy of love' or 'worthy to be loved'. You are no longer Bellatrix Lestrange. You are Bellatrix Cassiopeia Black."

"Welcome back, Miss Black," Dumbledore said.

Harry helped her to her feet and she walked to the man and bowed her head. "I owe you so many ... what I've done is unforgivable." She looked at Harry for a moment. "Especially what I did to Harry."

"Must not be unforgivable," Harry said softly. "If it was, then I wouldn't have been able to."

"I don't understand how," she replied softly.

"Let us go into the family room, where we can begin to explain some of the options available to you," Albus said.

"Death or Dementors," she said, "Simple choices, really."

“Actually,” said Sirius, “once the current administration pulls its head out of its ass, we can tell them that the marriage contract was repudiated, which caused a personality change. There is another option as well.” He stopped, and looked to Poppy Pomfrey.

“What Sirius wants me to explain to you,” she started with a mock glare at Sirius, “is something called Therapeutic Obliviation. It's used when someone has undergone a highly traumatic experience that they simply can not get past. Your life as a Lestranger certainly fits that criteria, it sounds. This would revert you to the fourteen year old girl that you once were, mentally.”

“But I'd still be in this old, abused body,” she said. She held up the hand. “I'd still have this horrifying connection to ...” She stopped, looking at the silver hand, and then screamed. Before anyone knew what had happened, she had grabbed the Gryffindor sword from Harry's waist and sliced off the silver appendage, and then began hacking at it viciously. “You vile, evil, disgusting -” she fell to the ground, crying, as she bled from the newly created stump.

Madam Pomfrey stopped the bleeding, and looked to Albus. “Interesting fact, Albus. I can now regrow her hand – *if* I can get the help of St. Mungos Healers.”

“I shall return shortly.” He looked up to Sirius and Lily. “I apologise. May I send them here?” At Sirius's look that clearly stated 'Why are you waiting around here?' he Apparated with a loud pop.

“My, he is in a hurry,” Lily said. “He's not been that noisy any time I've ever heard him Apparate.” She looked to Harry, who was holding Bellatrix's other hand, worry evident on his face.

“Don't go away, Belle,” he was saying softly. “I want the right to get to know the *real* mother of my baby. Please?”

“I'm evil, Harry! I've got this Mark on my arm, and you want to get to know me?”

“You're not evil. You're a beautiful woman going through a horrible time in her life. I want to be here for you.” He helped her to her feet again and pulled her into a hug. He felt a slight pain in his back where

her left arm came around and touched him, but ignored it as she cried against him.

The pain grew worse, and finally he squirmed slightly, making her move. She seemed unwilling to completely let him go, but she let him pull away slightly. The pain lessened and moved with her arm, so he gently grabbed it and raised the sleeve. Right where the pain had been forming was the Dark Mark. He scowled at it, and she tried to pull away, but his right hand held her wrist tighter than she expected.

He brought his other hand to her elbow, and his hands began to glow, much like in Sunnydale. She began to whimper, obviously in some pain, and as the glow from his hands began to flow outward, but mostly toward the Mark, she began to cry in pain. The two glows met at the Mark, which began to emit a grey light. Harry had begun to vibrate slightly, and suddenly seemed to throw ...something ... at the Mark, although he never moved. The snake and skull motif exploded into brilliant bright light, blinding everyone. When their vision was clear, Harry was wavering, and her arm was completely free of any tattoo.

She looked down at her arm in wonder before leaning forward suddenly and kissing him soundly. "Hell of a time to pass out," he muttered as he did just that.

He awoke to a cool cloth on his forehead, and opened his eyes to find nothing but females surrounding him. "I've died and gone to heaven!" he said with a smile. "Nothing but beautiful women as far as the eye can see!"

"Thank you dear!" his mother said from the side. "I love you too."

"I think Sirius and I should be offended," James Potter said with a laugh.

"Okay, so make it 'as far as *my* eye can see', and we should be good," he said with a laugh. "How long was I out this time?"

"Only about ten minutes," Hermione said. "You got rid of her Mark, Harry! How did you do that?"

He thought for a moment, and then shrugged. "I don't know. All I *do* know is that I was looking at her and thinking that the new Bellatrix should be free of that thing, and that I really wished I could remove it. I'm not sure it's something I can consciously control, really. I did it with the Hellmouth, because they really wanted it closed, but still able to be felt by those who feed off it. But I don't think I could look at Umbridge, for example, and fire off a bolt of white light that will have her screaming 'I'm melting!' or anything. How's Belle doing, by the way, and how's the baby?"

Sienna kissed his forehead once the cloth was removed. "Don't ever change, brother mine. Mother and baby are fine. Belle's having her right hand regenerated, and Madam Pomfrey says that the baby is incredibly healthy despite all the magic it's been through recently."

He sat up slowly. "I want to see her, and see how she's doing."

"With that mark gone," Sirius said, "she looks younger – she looks her real age, not her age from years in Azkaban." He laughed happily. "I need to call Remus. He'll be happy to hear about this." He nearly skipped from the room.

The others entered the room to find Bellatrix sitting in a recliner, her arm off to one side as the hand regenerated. Harry watched the still formless skin at the end move ever so slightly as the magic worked to rebuild her. "Why?" she asked simply.

"Well, that thing that you were once married to dragged you into the Death Eaters by way of the contract. I don't know how I did it, but I did. So you have no reminders of him other than your memories." He smiled at her. "I'm glad you're free of being that evil bitch. I've never seen Dad ... well, Sirius quite so happy." He stopped and looked at his mother for a moment, and his eyes began to twinkle mischievously. "Only other time I've seen him that bouncy is when Mum is wearing the Little Red Riding Hood costume."

"Can you blame me?" Sirius asked as he came back into the room, Remus Lupin right behind him. "Even you've commented that your mother is an attractive woman."

"If you want to see me wearing it again, you'll be silent about it," Lily said with a stern look that was utterly ruined by the quiet giggle that escaped. Sirius's mouth was quickly replaced with a zipper.

Remus walked over and looked at Bellatrix for a moment, and then grinned and hugged her carefully. "Welcome back, Belle."

"How can everyone tell?" she asked in confusion. "You all look at me and know immediately that I've changed. How?"

"The lines that the cruelty and hatred put there are gone," Sirius said. "Instead, there's some sorrow there, but there's also just a complete lack of anger."

"I'm just sorry that I'll need to be returning to school in just a couple days," Harry said. "I'd like to get to know the real mother of my child." He moved in and hugged her, and then stepped away after she'd finally released him. "I think this is a time for friends and family," he said. "We kids should step out and enjoy the winter."

Outside, he was surrounded by the others. "I am really impressed with you, Harry," Hermione said with a soft smile. "You're doing everything you can to make her feel loved, after everything else that happened."

"She really isn't the same person. You didn't see what happened when the contract was repudiated. She was crying hysterically. She hates what she was." He blushed slightly. "I almost wish I was older. Now that the hate and anger that marred her is gone, you can see the beauty that was there." He looked out at the area, missing the pained look that passed amongst the girls. "I'm betting that before we head back to school in a couple days, she'll tell us that she's going to carry the child to term, but that she'll end up doing Therapeutic Obliviation. The worst problem with that is that she'll be a fourteen year old in a thirty-something body."

When Hermione's *Daily Prophet* arrived on the fourteenth of January, she smoothed it out, gazed for a moment at the front page and gave a yelp that caused everyone in the vicinity to stare at her.

'What?' said Harry and Ron together.

For answer she spread the newspaper on the table in front of them and pointed at nine black-and-white photographs that filled the whole of the front page. Some of the people in the photographs were silently jeering; others were tapping their fingers on the frame of their pictures, looking insolent. Each picture was captioned with a name and the crime for which the person had been sent to Azkaban.

Antonin Dolohov, read the legend beneath a wizard with a long, pale, twisted face who was sneering up at Harry, *convicted of the brutal murders of Gideon and Fabian Prewett*.

Algernon Rookwood, said the caption beneath a pockmarked man with greasy hair who was leaning against the edge of his picture, looking bored, *convicted of leaking Ministry of Magic secrets to He Who Must Not Be Named*. Harry stopped paying attention to the names as he thought about this news.

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN

The Ministry of Magic announced late last night that there has been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

Speaking to reporters in his private office, Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, confirmed that ten high-security prisoners escaped in the early hours of yesterday evening and that he has already informed the Muggle Prime Minister of the dangerous nature of these individuals.

'We are, however, doing all we can to round up the criminals, and we beg the magical community to remain alert and cautious. On no account should any of these individuals be approached.'

"Who'd be dumb enough to approach them without Auror backup?" Ron asked around a piece of toast.

"Yeah, but saying that makes it so that he can say he's doing things to keep people safe, rather than actually doing something to keep them safe," Harry growled softly.

He glanced up at the staff table. Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were deep in conversation, both looking extremely grave. Professor Sprout had the *Prophet* propped against a bottle of ketchup and was reading the front page with such concentration that she was not noticing the gentle drip of egg yolk falling into her lap from her stationary spoon. Meanwhile, at the far end of the table, Professor Umbridge was tucking into a bowl of porridge. For once her pouchy toad's eyes were not sweeping the Great Hall looking for misbehaving students. She scowled as she gulped down her food and every now and then she shot a malevolent glance up the table to where Dumbledore and McGonagall were talking so intently.

"All hell is going to break loose sometime soon," Harry said. "Look at Umbridge. She doesn't like the news, because it makes her precious Ministry look bad, and she's particularly angry at Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster right now. We'll have a new decree of some sort any day now. What'll it be, something like Twenty-Six?"

Hagrid was now officially on probation, but to the disgust of Harry, Ron and Hermione, hardly anybody appeared to be upset about it; indeed, some people, Draco Malfoy prominent among them, seemed positively gleeful. There was only one topic of conversation in the corridors now: the nine escaped Death Eaters, whose story had finally filtered through the school from those few people who read the newspapers. Draco again was gleeful, but only when no teachers were near to hand. Rumours were flying that some of the convicts had been spotted in Hogsmeade, that they were supposed to be hiding out in the Shrieking Shack and that they were going to break into Hogwarts.

"Oh right," Harry grumbled one day as he heard the suggestion for the tenth time in twice as many minutes. "The fact that every single student in the school has had the idea means that it's the *least* likely place to go for them!"

"But they'd realise that people would think like you, which would make it a great place to hide, since everyone would think that they *wouldn't* hide there!" a Ravenclaw girl in her third year exclaimed.

Unable to resist a slightly invidious mind game, Harry replied, "But then again, they're smart enough to realise that people would think like you, which makes it a bad place to hide because people know that it's a good place to hide because it's a bad place to hide." He walked away with Hermione and Ron chuckling beside him as the girl blinked and worked it through in her head.

"That was evil," Hermione giggled when they were far enough away. "Fun, but evil."

That was really the only bit of fun that Harry was able to have, though, once the news of the Death Eater escape was public. Those who came from wizarding families had grown up hearing the names of these Death Eaters spoken with almost as much fear as Voldemort's; the crimes they had committed during the days of Voldemort's reign of terror were legendary. There were relatives of their victims among the Hogwarts students, who now found themselves the unwilling objects of a gruesome sort of reflected fame as they walked the corridors: Susan Bones, whose uncle, aunt and cousins had all died at the hands of one of the nine, said miserably during Herbology that she now had a good idea what it felt like to be Harry.

"And I don't know how you stand it - it's horrible," she said bluntly, dumping far too much dragon manure on her tray of Screechsnap seedlings, causing them to wriggle and squeak in discomfort.

It was true that Harry was the subject of much renewed muttering and pointing in the corridors these days, yet he thought he detected a slight difference in the tone of the whisperers' voices. They sounded curious rather than hostile now, and once or twice he was sure he overheard snatches of conversation that suggested that the speakers were not satisfied with the *Prophet's* version of how and why nine Death Eaters had managed to break out of the Azkaban fortress. In their confusion and fear, these doubters now seemed to be turning to the only other explanation available to them: the one that Harry and Dumbledore had been expounding since the previous year.

It was not only the students' mood that had changed. It was now quite common to come across two or three teachers conversing in low, urgent whispers in the corridors, breaking off their conversations the moment they saw students approaching.

"They obviously can't talk freely in the staff room any more," said Hermione in a low voice, as she, Harry and Ron passed Professors McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout huddled together outside the Charms classroom one day. "Not with Umbridge there."

"Reckon they know anything new?" said Ron, gazing back over his shoulder at the three teachers.

Harry stopped in front of the bulletin board for a moment and then growled. "If they do, then they won't be allowed to tell us about it." He jabbed his thumb at the new notice.

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

Teachers are hereby banned from giving students any information that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-Six.

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor

There were several jokes about it, but those ended quickly because of Umbridge's favoured form of detention. Lee Jordan discovered her tendencies by pointing out that by her own decree, she was not permitted to tell off Fred and George for playing Exploding Snap in the back of the classroom.

Harry gave them the recommendation about essence of murtlap.

He had thought the breakout from Azkaban might have humbled Umbridge a little, that she might have been abashed at the catastrophe that had occurred right under the nose of her beloved Fudge. It seemed, however, to have only intensified her furious desire to bring every aspect of life at Hogwarts under her personal control. She seemed determined at the very least to achieve a sacking before

long, and the only question was whether it would be Professor Trelawney or Hagrid who went first.

Every single Divination and Care of Magical Creatures lesson was now conducted in the presence of Umbridge and her clipboard. She lurked by the fire in the heavily perfumed tower room, interrupting Professor Trelawney's increasingly hysterical talks with difficult questions about ornithomancy and heptomology, insisting that she predicted students' answers before they gave them and demanding that she demonstrate her skill at the crystal ball, the tea leaves and the rune stones in turn. Harry thought Professor Trelawney might soon crack under the strain. Several times he passed her in the corridors - in itself a very unusual occurrence as she generally remained in her tower room - muttering wildly to herself, wringing her hands and shooting terrified glances over her shoulder, and all the while giving off a powerful smell of cooking sherry. If he had not been so worried about Hagrid, he would have felt sorry for her - but if one of them was to be ousted from their job, there could be only one choice for Harry as to who should remain.

Unfortunately, Harry could not see that Hagrid was putting up a better show than Trelawney. Though he seemed to be following Hermione's advice and had shown them nothing more frightening than a Crup since before Christmas, he too seemed to have lost his nerve. He was oddly distracted and jumpy during lessons, losing the thread of what he was saying to the class, answering questions wrongly, and all the time glancing anxiously at Umbridge. He was also more distant with Harry, Ron and Hermione than he had ever been before, and had expressly forbidden them to visit him after dark.

"If she catches yeh, it'll be all of our necks on the line," he told them flatly, and with no desire to do anything that might jeopardise his job further, they abstained from walking down to his hut in the evenings.

Since Umbridge seemed so determined to make sure that the students learned nothing while at Hogwarts, Harry redoubled his efforts in the P.C. gatherings. He scoured James Potter's notes with an almost religious fervour. He was pleased to see that all of them, even Zacharias Smith, had been spurred on to work harder than ever by the news that nine more Death Eaters were now on the loose, but

in nobody was this improvement more pronounced than in Neville. The news of this escape had wrought a strange and even slightly alarming change in him. Neville barely spoke during the DA meetings any more, but worked relentlessly on every new jinx and counter-curse Harry taught them, his plump face screwed up in concentration, apparently indifferent to injuries or accidents and working harder than anyone else in the room. He was improving so fast it was quite unnerving and when Harry taught them the Shield Charm - a means of deflecting minor jinxes so that they rebounded upon the attacker - only Hermione mastered the charm faster than Neville.

He grimaced after one meeting, having finally realised what Neville's reasoning was – he didn't know about Bellatrix's recent change, and was expecting her to come along with the others in some sort of attack. During one meeting, Harry simply said quietly to Neville as they practiced, “I need to talk to you after the meeting is over.” Neville's only response was to nod.

When the room had emptied of all but Harry, Hermione and Neville (Ron having chosen to head back so that Neville wouldn't feel as if he were being ganged up on), Harry cleared his throat. “It struck me during tonight's meeting,” he said slowly, “why you're working so hard.”

“Someday I'm going to face doing Bellatrix Lestrange, and I won't go any easier than my parents,” growled Neville. “I intend to take her with me.”

Harry sighed. “There's a problem with that, Neville. As far as the Ministry is concerned, Bellatrix Lestrange is no more.”

“When was she killed?” Neville asked eagerly.

“Bellatrix Black is alive and well and ... I hate to tell you this, but she's living with my parents.”

“WHAT?!” Neville shot to his feet. “Your family is harbouring a known murderer and psychotic? What possible reason could they have for such stupidity?”

"Well, first off, she's pregnant with my baby from that rape, and we don't want Voldemort using the baby in some sick way to kill or control me." Harry began to walk back and forth in front of Neville. "Second has to do with the way I referred to her. Note that I called her Bellatrix Black? Sirius, as the head of the Black family, officially repudiated her marriage to Rudolphus Lestrage. The old contract stated that she had to obey her husband in all things. The contract twisted her, Neville. The woman who tortured your parents is dead, and the woman in her place may well follow once the baby is born, unless we can convince her otherwise."

"Good," was all Neville could say. "Are we through?"

Harry nodded sadly, and Neville stormed from the room.

With all the extra work that was on Harry, what with studying for his O.W.L.s, teaching the P.C. gatherings, and generally trying to stay out of trouble, January seemed to disappear before he had realised it was leaving. Neville had stopped talking to him altogether, although he continued coming to the meetings. His fervour for the subject reached an all-time high.

As Valentine's Day began, Hermione approached Harry a little warily. "Would it bother you to do an interview with Luna's father during our next Hogsmeade weekend?"

"I've got nothing else to do," he said. "Should give me a chance to see how Belle is doing as well. She's in her last month now." He closed his eyes for a moment and thought. "In fact, it'll be exactly nine months in a week and a half."

They walked down to the front doors together, running into Luna, Ginny and Neville as they did. Harry looked at Neville with a calculating look, and once they were free of the crowds, he said, "Neville? Come with me to my parents' place. I'm doing an interview with Luna's dad, and you'll get to see the woman who's been the bone of contention between us. Meet her and talk to her."

“Why? So she can give me some sob story about how she's changed recently, and regrets what she did? She's a Death Eater, Black!”

Harry stepped back at the demotion from Christian to surname, and then raised his eyebrow. “You're right. Don't come. It's going to be tough enough to be doing this interview without worrying about whether or not you're going to kill the woman carrying my child.”

“That's another thing! She's a Death Eater, and you're letting her carry that thing to term? Are you crazy? She's just going to raise another Death Eater!” Neville stopped speaking suddenly, necessitated by the punch to the jaw that Harry had just given him. Neville was driven back a foot or so and fell flat on his back.

“So how long did you hate me in our first four years, Neville?” he snarled. “Remember, until Mum perfected that charm and proved that James Potter was my father, everyone *knew* that my biological father was a Death Eater. So why have you pretended to be my friend all these years, when you *knew* that I'd simply turn evil and try killing everyone?” Harry spun and stalked toward his family's home.

“Congratulations, Neville,” Hermione said. “You've finally done something only Malfoy has ever done before – driven Harry to violence against another student. Think about what he said, and why he reacted the way he did. If you can ever pull your head out of your arse, then maybe the friendship can be salvaged.” She also turned and walked away, leaving Neville alone in the snow.

At the house, Lily and Sirius looked at each other in worry before going to meet him at the front door. “This is my fault, isn't it?” Belle asked. “Those two are fighting because of me.” She shook her head. “I recognise him as a Longbottom, so I know why he hates me.”

“Well, I doubt that's why Harry hit him so hard,” Sirius said. “I'm betting that the boy channelled James's father for a minute.”

“Why do you figure that?” Belle asked.

"Because that's what I always wanted to do to Mr Potter whenever he spouted off about his 'blood will tell' crap," he said as he opened the door.

Harry gave both Sirius and his mother a hug, and then surprised Belle by hugging her gently. "Not much longer, little one," he said, bending over slightly to hide the surprising reaction to the woman carrying his child.

She apparently had noticed it, however, because her eyes widened, and then she blushed. "When I'm this size?" she asked softly.

"Don't know why, but yeah," he answered with his own blush bright enough to light the hallway.

Sirius snorted. "Now I know you're my son," he said, ending with a barked laugh. "Lily does that to me normally, but even more so these days."

"Oh my, yes," said a man as he stepped to the doorway of the family room. "I remember that my Lorelei ... well, let's just say that it's a good thing that you can't get pregnant *again* once you're pregnant, or my wife would never have had a chance to rest." He smiled sadly before stepping forward. "Lawrence Lovegood, Mr Black."

"Call me Harry, Mr Lovegood, otherwise I'll keep looking at my dad," Harry said with a nod. Hermione entered the house and was hugged quickly by Lily and Sirius, and she too surprised Belle by giving her a quick hug.

The interview was about to start when the door opened to admit Ron and Sienna, who happened to be holding hands, followed quite quickly by Ginny and the youngest James Potter, who were obviously there separately. "We're here for support," Ron said.

The crowd entered the family room, and after everyone was served tea or butterbeer, the conversation began. Harry talked for quite some time, reliving the horror of appearing in the graveyard, and the worry that Cedric and Fleur might not survive. He told of the horror of watching the thing that was Voldemort rise from the cauldron, and tried to gloss past the time Bellatrix had spent with him.

“Why are you not saying everything about what happened with Mrs Lestrangle?” Mr Lovegood asked.

“Honestly, if I went into detail, it would be more for some sort of sick titillation value, which might sell papers, but not do much for getting the story paid attention to. Also, you've met Miss Black. I'd like it if she could be returned to society once we've got the current administration either out of the way or understanding that all they're currently doing is hurting us all. The harsher the story about what Lestrangle did, the harder for Miss Black to get a fair shake.”

“I note that you refer to her as two different names, as if they're two different people.”

“They are. Belle Black is what she should have been, had a magical contract not been signed with the Lestranges. The contract stated that she had to obey her husband in all things. Since he was willingly a Death Eater ... well, I think you can make the connection.”

“Indeed. I think that will be a story for another issue, however,” Mr Lovegood said. “Let us first get the truth about Voldemort out there.” Harry nodded again.

There was a knock at the door, and Lily answered it. “May I help you, Mr Longbottom?” she asked coldly.

“May I please speak with your son?” he asked. “I owe him a rather large apology.” His voice had an odd whistle to it.

Harry exited the family room to see Neville standing there, blood down the front of his robes and on his face. As he opened his mouth to speak again, Harry could see that teeth had been broken.

“Harry? I know that I ended the friendship out there with my stupidity, but at least you made me think before I screwed up further. You were absolutely right to hit me for what I said. I'm also willing to give Lestrangle ... sorry, Miss Black a chance if I ever see her.” Neville finished and met Harry's eyes.

Harry smiled slightly. “I won't deny that what you said hurt me. I've heard that crap from my grandfather for years, and he won't forgive

me for not forgiving him now that he knows that he really is my grandfather.” He shook his head. “What you said hurt, but it takes a brave person to admit that they're wrong. I'm sorry that it cost you teeth, and -”

“If it hadn't, I probably wouldn't have thought much about it, so I will not accept you apologising to me for that. Regrowing these teeth is going to hurt, but I deserve it.”

Harry motioned him in and into the family room, where Belle sat. She looked up at Neville and then stood and ran from the room as best she could, tears starting to fall. Neville watched her leave in shock.

Harry followed Belle, and a moment later yelled back, “Mum? We have a situation here! I think her water broke!”

Pandemonium had been the word of the day for a little while after that, and they had all been very surprised by how quickly she'd delivered her first child – Harry was actually able to gaze upon his daughter before having to return to the school. He had a grin that nothing could erase as he walked back. Umbridge's response to his happiness had been a deepening of the scowl she always wore when he was around, and he knew that he's pay for it shortly. His happiness was apparently a personal affront to her.

The next day, news of the interview had made the rounds of Gryffindor Tower, but somehow had not escaped the confines of the Gryffindors. “Can't wait to see what Umbridge thinks of you going public,” said Dean, sounding awestruck at dinner on Monday night. Seamus was shovelling down large amounts of chicken and ham pie on Dean's other side, but Harry knew he was listening.

“It's the right thing to do, Harry,” said Neville, who was sitting opposite him. He was rather pale, but went on in a low voice, “It must have been difficult talking about it ... was it?”

“Yeah, but people have got to know what the Dark Wanker is capable of, haven't they?”

There was a noise from the other side of Dean, and a piece of baked potato flew across the table as Seamus began coughing. He finally looked up, but when he caught Harry's eye he looked quickly back at his plate again.

It was a week later, in the morning, that they entered the Great Hall for breakfast at exactly the same moment as the post owls. Hermione was not the only person eagerly awaiting her *Daily Prophet*: nearly everyone was eager for more news about the escaped Death Eaters, who, despite many reported sightings, had still not been caught. She gave the delivery owl a Knut and unfolded the newspaper eagerly while Harry helped himself to orange juice. The first owl landed with a thud in front of him.

"Who're you after?" he asked it, languidly removing his orange juice from underneath its beak and leaning forwards to see the recipient's name and address:

Harry Potter

Great Hall

Hogwarts School

Frowning, he made to take the letter from the owl, but before he could do so, three, four, five more owls had fluttered down beside it and were jockeying for position, treading in the butter and knocking over the salt as each one attempted to give him their letter first.

"What's going on?" Ron asked in amazement, as the whole of Gryffindor table leaned forwards to watch and another seven owls landed amongst the first ones, screeching, hooting and flapping their wings.

"Harry!" said Hermione breathlessly, plunging her hands into the feathery mass and pulling out a screech owl bearing a long, cylindrical package. "I think I know what this means - open this one first!"

Harry ripped off the brown packaging. Out rolled a tightly furled copy of the March edition of *The Quibbler*. He unrolled it to see his own

face grinning sheepishly at him from the front cover. In large red letters across this picture were the words:

HARRY BLACK SPEAKS OUT AT LAST:

THE TRUTH ABOUT HE WHO MUST NOT BE NAMED AND THE NIGHT I SAW HIM RETURN

"It's good, isn't it?" said Luna, who had drifted over to the Gryffindor table and now squeezed herself on to the bench between Fred and Ron. "It came out yesterday, I asked Dad to send you a free copy. I expect all these," she waved a hand at the assembled owls still scrabbling around on the table in front of Harry, "are letters from readers."

"That's what I thought," said Hermione eagerly. "Harry, d'you mind if we ...?"

"Help yourself," said Harry, feeling slightly bemused. Ron and Hermione both started ripping open envelopes.

"This one's from a bloke who thinks you're off your rocker," said Ron, glancing down his letter. "Ah well..."

"This woman recommends you try a good course of Shock Spells at St Mungo's," said Hermione, looking disappointed and crumpling up a second.

"This one looks OK, though," said Harry slowly, scanning a long letter from a witch in Paisley. "Hey, she says she believes me!"

"This one's in two minds," said Fred, who had joined in the letter-opening with enthusiasm. "Says you don't come across as a mad person, but he really doesn't want to believe You-Know-Who's back so he doesn't know what to think now. Blimey, what a waste of parchment."

"Here's another one you've convinced, Harry!" said Hermione excitedly. "Having read your side of the story, I am forced to the conclusion that the *Daily Prophet* has treated you very unfairly... little though I want to think that He Who Must Not Be Named has returned,

I am forced to accept that you are telling the truth' ... *Oh, this is wonderful!*" she gushed.

"Another one who thinks you're barking," said Ron, throwing a crumpled letter over his shoulder "... but this one says you've got her converted and she now thinks you're a real hero -she's put in a photograph, too - wow!"

"What is going on here?" said a falsely sweet, girlish voice.

Harry looked up with his hands full of envelopes. Professor Umbridge was standing behind Fred and Luna, her bulging toad's eyes scanning the mess of owls and letters on the table in front of Harry. Behind her he saw many of the students watching them avidly.

"Why have you got all these letters, Mr Potter?" she asked slowly.

"It's Black, and because people wrote to me," he replied brightly, intentionally exactly answering her question and not the one that she was actually asking.

"Mr *Potter*," she insisted, "Why are *you* receiving mail?" The tone in the woman's voice made it quite obvious that the concept of anyone writing a letter to him was a sign of mental illness, or worse.

"They're in response to the interview I gave during my last Hogsmeade visit. I talked to the Quibbler about what really happened to me at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament." He tossed her the issue. She caught it and stared down at the cover. Her pale, doughy face turned an ugly, patchy violet.

Umbridge looked up at him, incandescent with rage, the magazine shaking in her stubby fingers. "There will be no more Hogsmeade trips for you, Mr Potter," she whispered. "How you dare... how you could..." She took a deep breath. "I have tried again and again to teach you not to tell lies. The message, apparently, has still not sunk in. Fifty points from Gryffindor and another week's worth of detentions. Were it not more dangerous for you to be on the streets, I would expel you for this!"

She stalked away, clutching *The Quibbler* to her chest, the eyes of many students following her. By mid-morning enormous signs had been put up all over the school, not just on house noticeboards, but in the corridors and classrooms too.

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

Any student found in possession of the magazine The Quibbler will be expelled.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-seven.

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor

Hermione giggled madly every time she saw one of the signs. “By banning it, she has guaranteed that every single student in the school will read the interview! And by reacting this way, a lot of them will wonder if maybe you're telling the truth.” As he started to scowl, she amended, “I know you are, but people like Seamus refuse to believe it.”

It seemed that Hermione was right. By the end of the day, though Harry had not seen so much as a corner of *The Quibbler* anywhere in the school, the whole place seemed to be quoting the interview to each other. Harry heard them whispering about it as they queued up outside classes, discussing it over lunch and in the back of lessons, while Hermione even reported that every occupant of the cubicles in the girls' toilets had been talking about it when she nipped in there before Ancient Runes.

“Then they spotted me, and obviously they know I know you, so they bombarded me with questions,” Hermione told Harry, her eyes shining, “Harry, I think they believe you, I really do, I think you've finally got them convinced!”

Umbridge, meanwhile, was stalking the school, stopping students at random and demanding that they turn out their books and pockets: Harry knew she was looking for copies of *The Quibbler*, but the students were several steps ahead of her. The pages carrying Harry's interview had been bewitched to resemble extracts from textbooks if

anyone but themselves read it, or else wiped magically blank until they wanted to peruse it again. Soon it seemed that every single person in the school had read it.

The teachers were of course forbidden from mentioning the interview by Educational Decree Number Twenty-six, but they found ways to express their feelings about it all the same. Professor Sprout awarded Gryffindor twenty points when Harry passed her a watering can; a beaming Professor Flitwick pressed a box of squeaking sugar mice on him at the end of Charms, said, “Shh!” and hurried away; and Lavender reported that Professor Trelawney broke into hysterical sobs during Divination and announced to the startled class, and a very disapproving Umbridge, that Harry was *not* going to suffer an early death after all, but would live to a ripe old age, become Minister for Magic and have twelve children.

“By twelve different girls,” Katie purred in his ear, just before sitting on his lap to hide the reaction she'd just caused. As she sat there, Seamus walked up to him, quite abashed. “You were right about the three strikes, Harry. I'm not much of a friend if I can turn on you that way, but I just wanted you to know that I believe you, and I've sent a copy of the article to me mum.” He turned and headed toward the stairs.

Katie knew Harry well enough that she was off his lap as he started to rise. “Seamus?” he said. “I've recently come to an understanding of why your mother acted the way she did, and ... I spoke out of anger on the train in September. No one wants to believe that they're in the middle of a war, and ... well, I'm not happy about it, but I can understand thinking I was crazy, rather than admit that the Dark Nudist was back.”

There were snorts of laughter from around the common room, especially from Seamus. “‘Dark Nudist’? Where'd you get that one from?” he asked through his laughter.

“Well, I've been told by the Headmaster that ‘fear of a name increases the fear of the thing itself’, or something very similar. If people can't call him by a made up name – Voldemort -” he paused to allow the shivers “then we ought to come up with something else.

Calling him the Dark Lord gives him a title and hints at a respect that he doesn't deserve, so calling him the Dark Wanker or Dork Lard or something like that helps you keep in mind that there are all sorts of ways to fight him."

"But Dark Nudist?" Katie persisted.

"Supposedly, when they found me in my crib, there were a set of robes that only Tommie boy would ever wear, under pain of death. That meant that he had either been vaporised in the incident that gave me my scar, or he had taken to frolicking naked in my parents' back garden." Laughter filled the room at the thought, especially when Harry did an over-the-top shudder at the thought.

Harry really enjoyed stumbling across Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and a weedy-looking boy that Hermione whispered was called Theodore Nott. They looked round at Harry as he browsed the shelves for the book he needed: Goyle cracked his knuckles threateningly and Malfoy whispered something undoubtedly malevolent to Crabbe. Harry knew perfectly well why they were acting like this: he had named all of their fathers as Death Eaters.

"And the best bit," whispered Hermione gleefully, as they left the library, "is they can't contradict you, because they can't admit they've read the article!"

To cap it all, Luna told him over dinner that no issue of *The Quibbler* had ever sold out faster. "Dad's reprinting!" she told Harry, her eyes popping excitedly. "He can't believe it, he says people seem even more interested in this than the Crumple-Horned Snorkacks!"

That was some of the last enjoyment that Harry had for a while, between detentions that left his hand bleeding furiously (at least one of which lasted until five am on a day that he had Defence Against the Dark Arts with her), worries that Hagrid would be fired and the desire to talk to the Headmaster about what was happening.

Watching Dolores Umbridge as she fired the Divinations professor was not one of his more pleasant memories, either, although the

aftermath was ... interesting. She stood and watched, with an expression of gloating enjoyment, as Professor Trelawney shuddered and moaned, rocking backwards and forwards on her trunk in paroxysms of grief. Harry heard a muffled sob to his left and looked around. Lavender and Parvati were both crying quietly, their arms round each other. Then he heard footsteps. Professor McGonagall had broken away from the spectators, marched straight up to Professor Trelawney and was patting her firmly on the back while withdrawing a large handkerchief from within her robes. For those who knew the dislike that had been between these two for years, this was an astonishing situation.

"There, there, Sybill ... calm down ... blow your nose on this ... it's not as bad as you think, now ... you are not going to have to leave Hogwarts -"

"Oh really, Professor McGonagall?" said Umbridge in a deadly voice, taking a few steps forward. "And your authority for that statement is - ?"

"That would be mine," said a deep voice.

The oaken front doors had swung open. Students beside them scuttled out of the way as Dumbledore appeared in the entrance. What he had been doing out in the grounds Harry could not imagine, but there was something impressive about the sight of him framed in the doorway against an oddly misty night. Leaving the doors wide open behind him he strode forwards through the circle of onlookers towards Professor Trelawney, tear-stained and trembling, on her trunk, Professor McGonagall alongside her.

"Yours, Professor Dumbledore?" said Umbridge, with a singularly unpleasant little laugh. "I'm afraid you do not understand the position. I have here -" she pulled a parchment scroll from within her robes "- an Order of Dismissal signed by myself and the Minister for Magic. Under the terms of Educational Decree Number Twenty-three, the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts has the power to inspect, place upon probation and sack any teacher she - that is to say, / - feels is not performing to the standards required by the Ministry of Magic. I have

decided that Professor Trelawney is not up to scratch. I have dismissed her.”

To Harry's very great surprise, Dumbledore continued to smile. He looked down at Professor Trelawney, who was still sobbing and choking on her trunk, and said, “You are quite right, of course, Professor Umbridge. As High Inquisitor you have every right to dismiss my teachers. You do not, however, have the authority to send them away from the castle. I am afraid,” he went on, with a courteous little bow, “that the power to do that still resides with the Headmaster, and it is my wish that Professor Trelawney continue to live at Hogwarts.”

At this, Professor Trelawney gave a wild little laugh in which a hiccough was barely hidden.

“No - no, I'll g - go, Dumbledore! I sh - shall - leave Hogwarts and's - seek my fortune elsewhere -”

“No,” said Dumbledore sharply. “It is my wish that you remain, Sybill.”

He turned to Professor McGonagall.

“Might I ask you to escort Sybill back upstairs, Professor McGonagall?”

“Of course,” said McGonagall. “Up you get, Sybill ...”

Professor Sprout came hurrying forwards out of the crowd and grabbed Professor Trelawney's other arm. Together, they guided her past Umbridge and up the marble stairs. Professor Flitwick went scurrying after them, his wand held out before him; he squeaked “*Locomotor* trunks!” and Professor Trelawney's luggage rose into the air and proceeded up the staircase after her, Professor Flitwick bringing up the rear.

Professor Umbridge was standing stock still, staring at Dumbledore, who continued to smile benignly.

“And what,” she said, in a whisper that carried all around the Entrance Hall, “are you going to do with her once I appoint a new Divination teacher who needs her lodgings?”

“Oh, that won't be a problem,” said Dumbledore pleasantly. “You see, I have already found us a new Divination teacher, and he will prefer lodgings on the ground floor.”

“You've found -?” said Umbridge shrilly. “*You've* found? Might I remind you, Dumbledore, that under Educational Decree Number Twenty-two -” She was obviously building toward a proper high dudgeon.

“Yes, yes, the Ministry has the right to appoint a suitable candidate if – and only if – the Headmaster is unable to find one,” said Dumbledore calmly, although a hint of his satisfaction at pulling the rug from beneath Umbridge could be heard. “And I am happy to say that on this occasion I have succeeded. May I introduce you?”

He turned to face the open front doors, through which night mist was now drifting. Harry heard hooves. There was a shocked murmur around the Hall and those nearest the doors hastily moved even further backwards, some of them tripping over in their haste to clear a path for the newcomer.

Through the mist came a face Harry had seen once before on a dark, dangerous night in the Forbidden Forest: white-blond hair and astonishingly blue eyes; the head and torso of a man joined to the palomino body of a horse.

“This is Firenze,” said Dumbledore happily to a thunderstruck Umbridge. “I think you'll find him suitable.”

Umbridge walked the halls thunderously for some time after. It was quite obvious, by her face, that she was disgusted by a non-human teaching at the school, but that she had no legal standing to fire him.

Meanwhile, as the teachers and Hermione persisted in reminding them, the OWLs were drawing ever nearer. All the fifth-years were

suffering from stress to some degree, but Hannah Abbott became the first to receive a Calming Draught from Madam Pomfrey after she burst into tears during Herbology and sobbed that she was too stupid to take exams and wanted to leave school now.

If it had not been for the PC lessons, Harry thought he would have been extremely unhappy. He sometimes felt he was living for the hours he spent in the Room of Requirement, working hard but thoroughly enjoying himself at the same time, swelling with pride as he looked around at his fellow PC members and saw how far they had come. Indeed, Harry sometimes wondered how Umbridge was going to react when all the members of the PC received 'Outstanding' in their Defence Against the Dark Arts OWLs.

They had finally started work on Patronuses, which everybody had been very keen to practise, though, as Harry kept reminding them, producing a Patronus in the middle of a brightly lit classroom when they were not under threat was very different from producing it when confronted by something like a Dementor.

“Oh, don't be such a killjoy,” said Cho brightly, watching her silvery swan-shaped Patronus soar around the Room of Requirement during their last lesson before Easter. “They're so pretty!”

“They're not supposed to be pretty, they're supposed to protect you,” said Harry patiently. “What we really need is a Boggart or something”

“But that would be really scary!” said Lavender, who was shooting puffs of silver vapour out of the end of her wand. “And I still – can't – do it!” she added angrily.

“Practice,” he said simply. “That's what it took for me. The hard part is doing it while faced by those ... soulless ...” He shook his head. “Sorry. I did not enjoy facing those things last year.”

Neville was having trouble, too. His face was screwed up in concentration, but only feeble wisps of silver smoke issued from his wand tip.

“You've got to think of something happy,” Harry reminded him.

"I'm trying," said Neville miserably, who was trying so hard his round face was actually shining with sweat.

"Harry, I think I'm doing it!" yelled Seamus, who had been brought along to his first ever DA meeting by Dean. "Look – ah – it's gone ... but it was definitely something hairy, Harry!"

Hermione's Patronus, a shining silver otter, was gambolling around her. "They *are* sort of nice, aren't they?" she said, looking at it fondly.

The door of the Room of Requirement opened, and closed. Harry looked round to see who had entered, but there did not seem to be anybody there. It was a few moments before he realised that the people close to the door had fallen silent. Next thing he knew, something was tugging at his robes somewhere near the knee. He looked down and saw, to his very great astonishment, Dobby the house-elf peering up at him from beneath his usual eight woolly hats.

"Hi, Dobby!" he said. "What are you - What's wrong?"

The elf's eyes were wide with terror and he was shaking. The members of the DA closest to Harry had fallen silent; everybody in the room was watching Dobby. The few Patronuses people had managed to conjure faded away into silver mist, leaving the room looking much darker than before.

"Harry Black, sir ..." squeaked the elf, trembling from head to foot, "... Dobby has come to warn you ... but the house-elves have been warned not to tell -"

Harry thought for only a moment before it struck him. "People – get out. Umbridge is coming." When they simply stood around in shock, he yelled, "WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? RUN!"

They all pelted towards the exit at once, forming a scrum at the door, then people burst through. Harry could hear them sprinting along the corridors and hoped they had the sense not to try and make it all the way to their dormitories. It was only ten to nine; if they just took refuge in the library or the Owlery, which were both nearer

“Harry, come on!” shrieked Hermione from the centre of the knot of people now fighting to get out.

He scooped up Dobby, who was still attempting to do himself serious injury, and ran with the elf in his arms to join the back of the queue.

“Dobby – this is an order – get back down to the kitchen with the other elves and, if she asks you whether you warned me, lie and say no!” said Harry. “And I forbid you to hurt yourself!” he added, dropping the elf as he made it over the threshold at last and slammed the door behind him.

“Thank you, Harry Black!” squeaked Dobby, and he streaked off. Harry glanced left and right, the others were all moving so fast he caught only glimpses of flying heels at either end of the corridor before they vanished; he started to run right; there was a boys' bathroom up ahead, he could pretend he'd been in there all the time if he could just reach it -

- and felt his nose break as he impacted with the floor, hit with a full body bind from behind.

“Hey Professor – *Professor!* I've got one!” Malfoy yelled down the hallway with a smirk.

Umbridge came bustling round the far corner, breathless but wearing a delighted smile.

“It's him!” she said jubilantly at the sight of Harry on the floor. “Excellent, Draco, excellent, oh, very good – fifty points to Slytherin! I'll take him from here ... stand up, Potter!” When Harry did not immediately respond by climbing to his feet, she added, “One hundred points from Gryffindor, Potter.”

“I'm in a body bind, you arrogant toad!” he yelled. “I can't get up!” He saw stars as Malfoy's foot connected with the side of his head.

Chapter 19

Harry awoke in the Headmaster's office. The office was full of people. Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, his expression serene, the tips of his long fingers together. Professor McGonagall stood rigidly beside him, her face extremely tense. Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, was rocking backwards and forwards on his toes beside the fire, apparently immensely pleased with the situation; Kingsley Shacklebolt and a tough-looking wizard with very short wiry hair whom Harry did not recognise, were positioned either side of the door like guards, and the freckled, bespectacled form of Percy Weasley hovered excitedly beside the wall, a quill and a heavy scroll of parchment in his hands, apparently poised to take notes.

The portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses were not faking sleep tonight. All of them were alert and serious, watching what was happening below them. As Harry entered, a few flitted into neighbouring frames and whispered urgently into their neighbour's ear.

He felt his nose explode in pain again as he was dropped once more to the floor, face down, the body bind still active.

"Well," Cornelius Fudge said from off to one side. "Well, well, well."

Harry felt the body bind release, and heard Dumbledore ask "Was dropping him while in a full bind truly necessary, Madam Umbridge?"

"If the young criminal is going to be involved with the sort of things that he is, then he should be prepared for a little pain," she riposted.

Harry got to his feet to see Fudge glaring at him with a vicious satisfaction. Harry responded with a cold look and looked further.

"He was heading back to Gryffindor Tower," said Umbridge. There was an indecent excitement in her voice, the same callous pleasure Harry had heard as she watched Professor Trelawney dissolving with misery in the Entrance Hall. "The Malfoy boy cornered him."

"Did he, did he?" said Fudge appreciatively. "I must remember to tell Lucius. Well, Potter ... I expect you know why you are here?"

"Other than to go through another round of explaining to people that my legal last name is Black? Not a clue."

"James Potter is your father," Percy said imperiously.

"And until recently, he and I got along like Grackleflint scales and open flames – explosively. Sirius Black legally adopted me, and Madam Umbridge has been removing points from Gryffindor because of that. My biological father is James Potter, but my legal father is Sirius Black. My name is Harry James Black."

Fudge waved his hand dismissively. "Yes, yes ... we're not hear to listen to you whinge that you're being called names. So you have no idea," continued Fudge in a voice positively sagging with sarcasm, "why Professor Umbridge has brought you to this office? You are not aware that you have broken any school rules?"

"As far as I am aware, Minister," Harry answer, "I have broken no valid school rules."

"Or Ministry Decrees?" amended Fudge angrily.

Well, now there you have me," said Harry blandly. "I did have a copy of the Quibbler for a while – wait, that was *before* the anti-Quibbler decree."

"So, it's news to you, is it," said Fudge, his voice now thick with anger, "that an illegal student organisation has been discovered within this school?"

"You mean you've actually caught some of Voldemort's Death Eaters in this school?" he asked with false excitement, knowing what Fudge was referring to.

"I think, Minister," said Umbridge silkily from beside him, "we might make better progress if I fetch our informant."

"Yes, yes, do," said Fudge, nodding, and he glanced maliciously at Dumbledore as Umbridge left the room. "There's nothing like a good witness, is there, Dumbledore?"

"Nothing at all, Cornelius," said Dumbledore gravely, inclining his head. "While you're getting the witness, I shall call Madam Pomfrey to deal with the injuries that Mr Black has sustained."

"Thank you, sir. Malfoy's boot to my head hurt quite a bit."

"Young Malfoy would do no such thing!" Fudge exclaimed loudly. "His father would never stand for such activities!"

"No, he'd rather just threaten all the Board of Governors to get rid of the Headmaster here, and try to slip a student a dangerous diary, not to mention getting you to throw an *innocent* man into Azkaban, just because you had to look good to the public."

Dumbledore pulled his head from the fire as Percy sniffed disdainfully, while Fudge stared daggers at Harry. There was a wait of a few more minutes in which nobody looked at each other before Harry heard the door open behind him. Umbridge moved past him into the room, gripping by the shoulder Cho's curly-haired friend, Marietta, who was hiding her face in her hands.

"Don't be scared, dear, don't be frightened," said Professor Umbridge softly, patting her on the back, "it's quite all right, now. You have done the right thing. The Minister is very pleased with you. He'll be telling your mother what a good girl you've been."

"Marietta's mother, Minister," she added, looking up at Fudge, "is Madam Edgecombe from the Department of Magical Transportation, Floo Network office - she's been helping us police the Hogwarts fires, you know."

"Jolly good, jolly good!" said Fudge heartily. "Like mother, like daughter, eh? Well, come on, now, dear, look up, don't be shy, let's hear what you've got to - galloping gargoyles!"

As Marietta raised her head, Fudge leapt backwards in shock, nearly landing himself in the fire. He cursed, and stamped on the hem of his

cloak which had started to smoke. Marietta gave a wail and pulled the neck of her robes right up to her eyes, but not before everyone had seen that her face was horribly disfigured by a series of close-set purple pustules that had spread across her nose and cheeks to form the word 'SNEAK'.

"Never mind the spots now, dear," said Umbridge impatiently, "just take your robes away from your mouth and tell the Minister -"

But Marietta gave another muffled wail and shook her head frantically.

"Oh, very well, you silly girl, I'll tell him," snapped Umbridge. She hitched her sickly smile back on to her face and said, "Well, Minister, Miss Edgecombe here came to my office shortly after dinner this evening and told me she had something she wanted to tell me. She said that if I proceeded to a secret room on the seventh floor, sometimes known as the Room of Requirement, I would find out something to my advantage. I questioned her a little further and she admitted that there was to be some kind of meeting there. Unfortunately, at that point this hex," she waved impatiently at Marietta's concealed face, "came into operation and upon catching sight of her face in my mirror the girl became too distressed to tell me any more."

"Well, now," said Fudge, fixing Marietta with what he evidently imagined was a kind and fatherly look, "it is very brave of you, my dear, coming to tell Professor Umbridge. You did exactly the right thing. Now, will you tell me what happened at this meeting? What was its purpose? Who was there?"

But Marietta would not speak; she merely shook her head again, her eyes wide and fearful.

"Haven't we got a counter-jinx for this?" Fudge asked Umbridge impatiently, gesturing at Marietta's face. "So she can speak freely?"

"I have not yet managed to find one," Umbridge admitted grudgingly, and Harry felt a surge of pride in Hermione's jinxing ability. "But it doesn't matter if she won't speak, I can take up the story from here."

"You will remember, Minister, that I sent you a report back in October that Potter had met a number of fellow students in Hogsmeade -"

"And what is your evidence for that?" cut in Professor McGonagall.

"I have testimony from Mundungus Fletcher, Minerva, who happened to be near the Black home in Hogsmeade at the time," said Umbridge smugly. "He heard every word Potter said and hastened straight to the school to report to me -"

"If you consider catching him finding him in the Hog's Head attempting to sell ... questionable ... cauldrons -" Kingsley murmured, ostensibly under his breath, but loud enough to be heard. Umbridge's annoyed "Hem-hem" caused him to shrug his apology to her.

"The purpose of Potter's meeting with these students," continued Professor Umbridge, "was to persuade them to join an illegal society, whose aim was to learn spells and curses the Ministry has decided are inappropriate for school-age -"

"I think you'll find you're wrong there, Dolores," said Dumbledore quietly, peering at her over the half-moon spectacles perched halfway down his crooked nose.

Harry stared at him. He could not see how Dumbledore was going to talk him out of this one; if Fletcher had indeed heard every word he had said there was simply no escaping it.

"Oho!" said Fudge, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet again. "Yes, do let's hear the latest cock-and-bull story designed to pull Potter out of trouble! Go on, then, Dumbledore, go on – Fletcher was lying, was he? Or was it Potter's identical twin at the Black home that day? I know, it was an evil Portkey and a non-existent Dark Lord taking his place to get him in trouble!"

Percy Weasley let out a hearty laugh. "Oh, very good, Minister, very good!"

Harry could have kicked him. Then he saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore was smiling gently, too. "Cornelius, I do not deny - and nor, I am sure, does Harry – whose last name is Black, I hasten to

remind you – that he was at his parents' house that day, nor that he was trying to recruit students to a Defence Against the Dark Arts group. I am merely pointing out that Dolores is quite wrong to suggest that such a group was, at that time, illegal. If you remember, the Ministry Decree banning all student societies was not put into effect until two days after Harry's Hogsmeade meeting, so he was not breaking any rules at all.”

Percy looked as though he had been struck in the face by something very heavy. Harry was longing to make that a truism very shortly. Fudge remained motionless in mid-bounce, his mouth hanging open.

Umbridge recovered first. “That's all very fine, Headmaster,” she said, smiling sweetly, “but we are now nearly six months on from the introduction of Educational Decree Number Twenty-four. If the first meeting was not illegal, all those that have happened since most certainly are.”

“Well,” said Dumbledore, surveying her with polite interest over the top of his interlocked fingers, “they certainly *would* be, if they *had* continued after the Decree came into effect. Do you have any evidence that any such meetings continued?”

As Dumbledore spoke, Harry heard a rustle behind him and rather thought Kingsley whispered something. He could have sworn, too, that he felt something brush against his side, a gentle something like a draught or bird wings, but looking down he saw nothing there.

“Evidence?” repeated Umbridge, with that horrible wide toad-like smile. “Have you not been listening, Dumbledore? Why do you think Miss Edgecombe is here?”

“Oh, can she tell us about six months' worth of meetings?” said Dumbledore, raising his eyebrows. “I was under the impression that she was merely reporting a meeting tonight.”

“Miss Edgecombe,” said Umbridge at once, “tell us how long these meetings have been going on, dear. You can simply nod or shake your head, I'm sure that won't make the spots worse. Have they been happening regularly over the last six months?”

Harry felt a horrible plummeting in his stomach. This was it, they had hit a dead end of solid evidence that not even Dumbledore would be able to shift aside.

“Just nod or shake your head, dear,” Umbridge said coaxingly to Marietta, “come on, now, that won't re-activate the jinx.”

Everyone in the room was gazing at the top of Marietta's face. Only her eyes were visible between the pulled-up robes and her curly fringe. Perhaps it was a trick of the firelight, but her eyes looked oddly blank. And then - to Harry's utter amazement - Marietta shook her head.

Umbridge looked quickly at Fudge, then back at Marietta. “I don't think you understood the question, did you, dear? I'm asking whether you've been going to these meetings for the past six months? You have, haven't you?”

Again, Marietta shook her head. “What do you mean by shaking your head, dear?” said Umbridge in a testy voice.

“I would have thought her meaning was quite clear,” said Professor McGonagall harshly, “there have been no secret meetings for the past six months. Is that correct, Miss Edgecombe?” Marietta nodded.

“But there was a meeting tonight!” said Umbridge furiously. “There was a meeting, Miss Edgecombe, you told me about it, in the Room of Requirement! And Potter was the leader, was he not, Potter organised it, Potter – *why are you shaking your head, girl?*”

“Well, usually when a person shakes their head,” said McGonagall coldly, “they mean 'no'. So unless Miss Edgecombe is using a form of sign-language as yet unknown to humans -”

Professor Umbridge seized Marietta, pulled her round to face her and began shaking her very hard. A split second later Dumbledore was on his feet, his wand raised; Kingsley started forwards and Umbridge leapt back from Marietta, waving her hands in the air as though they had been burned.

"While I cannot prevent you from manhandling my students when I am not present, no matter how much I would like to, I will not allow you to manhandle students in my presence, Dolores," said Dumbledore and, for the first time, he looked angry.

"You want to calm yourself, Madam Umbridge," said Kingsley, in his deep, slow voice. "You don't want to get yourself into trouble, now. I'd have no recourse but to ... arrest you."

"No," said Umbridge breathlessly, glancing up at the towering figure of Kingsley. "I mean, yes – you're right, Shacklebolt – I – I forgot myself."

Marietta was standing exactly where Umbridge had released her. She seemed neither perturbed by Umbridge's sudden attack, nor relieved by her release; she was still clutching her robe up to her oddly blank eyes and staring straight ahead of her. A sudden suspicion, connected to Kingsley's whisper and the thing he had felt shoot past him, sprang into Harry's mind. *She's been Obliviated!*

"Dolores," said Fudge, with the air of trying to settle something once and for all, "the meeting tonight - the one we know definitely happened -"

"Yes," said Umbridge, pulling herself together, "yes... well, Miss Edgecombe tipped me off and I proceeded at once to the seventh floor, accompanied by certain *trustworthy* students, so as to catch those in the meeting red-handed. It appears that they were forewarned of my arrival, however, because when we reached the seventh floor they were running in every direction. It does not matter, however. I have all their names here, Miss Parkinson ran into the Room of Requirement for me to see if they had left anything behind. We needed evidence and the room provided."

To Harry's horror, she withdrew from her pocket the list of names that had been pinned upon the Room of Requirement's wall and handed it to Fudge. "The moment I saw Potter's name on the list, I knew what we were dealing with," she said softly.

"Excellent," said Fudge, a smile spreading across his face, "excellent, Dolores. And ... by thunder ... look at this! Potter's Commandos!" He

glared at Harry. "You were training people to take over the Ministry, weren't you?"

"Oh dear, it appears that ... what is that phrase ... oh yes - 'the game is up'," Dumbledore said. "I had hoped that getting them to name it after a well loved Defense teacher might throw off suspicion, but – would you like a written confession from me, Cornelius - or will a statement before these witnesses suffice?"

Harry stared at the Headmaster incredulously. He also saw McGonagall and Kingsley look at each other. There was fear in both faces. He did not understand what was going on, and nor, apparently, did Fudge.

"Statement?" said Fudge slowly. "What - I don't -?"

"I convinced them not to call it Dumbledore's Army, Cornelius. Think of that. *Dumbledore's Army*. Too obvious."

Understanding blazed suddenly in Fudge's face. He took a horrified step backwards, yelped, and jumped out of the fire again. "You?" he whispered, stamping again on his smouldering cloak.

"That's right," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

"You organised this?"

"I did," said Dumbledore.

"You recruited these students for - for your army?"

"Tonight was supposed to be the first meeting," said Dumbledore, nodding. "Merely to see whether they would be interested in joining me. I see now that it was a mistake to invite Miss Edgecombe, of course."

Marietta nodded. Fudge looked from her to Dumbledore, his chest swelling. "Then you *have* been plotting against me!" he yelled.

"That's right," said Dumbledore cheerfully.

“NO!” shouted Harry.

Kingsley flashed a look of warning at him, McGonagall widened her eyes threateningly, but it had suddenly dawned on Harry what Dumbledore was about to do, and he could not let it happen. “No - Professor Dumbledore -!” he said weakly

“Be quiet, Harry, or I am afraid you will have to leave my office,” said Dumbledore calmly.

“Yes, shut up, Potter!” barked Fudge, who was still ogling Dumbledore with a kind of horrified delight. “Well, well, well - I came here tonight expecting to expel Potter and instead -”

“Instead you get to arrest me,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “It's like losing a Knut and finding a Galleon, isn't it?”

“Weasley!” cried Fudge, now positively quivering with delight, “Weasley, have you written it all down, everything he's said, his confession, have you got it?”

“Yes, sir, I think so, sir!” said Percy eagerly, whose nose was splattered with ink from the speed of his note-taking.

“The bit about how he's been trying to build up an army against the Ministry, how he's been working to destabilise me?”

“Yes, sir, I've got it, yes!” said Percy, scanning his notes joyfully.

“Very well, then,” said Fudge, now radiant with glee, “duplicate your notes, Weasley, and send a copy to the *Daily Prophet* at once. If we send a fast owl we should make the morning edition!” Percy dashed from the room, slamming the door behind him, and Fudge turned back to Dumbledore. “You will now be escorted back to the Ministry, where you will be formally charged, then sent to Azkaban to await trial!”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore gently, “yes. Yes, I thought we might hit that little snag.”

“Snag?” said Fudge, his voice still vibrating with joy. “I see no snag, Dumbledore!”

“Well,” said Dumbledore apologetically, “I’m afraid I do.”

“Oh, really?”

“Well - it’s just that you seem to be labouring under the delusion that I am going to - what is the phrase - *come quietly*. I am afraid I am not going to come quietly at all, Cornelius. I have absolutely no intention of being sent to Azkaban. I could break out, of course - but what a waste of time, and frankly, I can think of a whole host of things I would rather be doing.”

Umbridge’s face was growing steadily redder; she looked as though she was being filled with boiling water. Fudge stared at Dumbledore with a very silly expression on his face, as though he had just been stunned by a sudden blow and could not quite believe it had happened. He made a small choking noise, then looked round at Kingsley and the man with short grey hair, who alone of everyone in the room had remained entirely silent so far. The latter gave Fudge a reassuring nod and moved forwards a little, away from the wall. Harry saw his hand drift, almost casually, towards his pocket.

So did Dumbledore, apparently. “Please don’t be silly, Mr Dawlish,” he said conversationally. “While you did admirably on your NEWTs while here at Hogwarts – all O’s, if my memory serves – if you attempt to ... ahem ... ‘bring me in by force’, I will be unfortunately forced to injure you, and I do not wish that.”

The man called Dawlish blinked rather foolishly. He looked towards Fudge again, but this time seemed to be hoping for a clue as to what to do next.

“So,” sneered Fudge, recovering himself, “you intend to take on Dawlish, Shackbolt, Dolores and myself single-handed, do you, Dumbledore?”

“Merlin’s beard, no,” said Dumbledore, smiling, “not unless you are foolish enough to force me to.”

"He will not be single-handed!" said Professor McGonagall loudly, plunging her hand inside her robes.

"Oh yes he will, Minerva!" said Dumbledore sharply. "Hogwarts needs you!"

"Enough of this rubbish!" said Fudge, pulling out his own wand. "Dawlish! Shacklebolt! *Take him!*"

A streak of silver light flashed around the room; there was a bang like a gunshot and the floor trembled; a hand grabbed the scruff of Harry's neck and forced him down on the floor as a second silver flash went off; several of the portraits yelled, Fawkes screeched and a cloud of dust filled the air. Coughing in the dust, Harry saw a dark figure fall to the ground with a crash in front of him; there was a shriek and a thud and somebody cried, "No!"; then there was the sound of breaking glass, frantically scuffling footsteps, a groan ... and silence.

Harry struggled around to see who was half-strangling him and saw Professor McGonagall crouched beside him; she had forced both him and Marietta out of harm's way. Dust was still floating gently down through the air on to them. Panting slightly, Harry saw a very tall figure moving towards them.

"Are you all right?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes!" said Professor McGonagall, getting up and dragging Harry and Marietta with her.

The dust was clearing. The wreckage of the office loomed into view: Dumbledore's desk had been overturned, all of the spindly tables had been knocked to the floor, their silver instruments in pieces. Fudge, Umbridge, Kingsley and Dawlish lay motionless on the floor. Fawkes the phoenix soared in wide circles above them, singing softly.

"Unfortunately, I had to hex Kingsley too, or it would have looked very suspicious," said Dumbledore in a low voice. "He was remarkably quick on the uptake, modifying Miss Edgecombe's memory like that while everyone was looking the other way - thank him, for me, won't you, Minerva?"

“Now, they will all awake very soon and it will be best if they do not know that we had time to communicate - you must act as though no time has passed, as though they were merely knocked to the ground, they will not remember -”

“Where will you go, Dumbledore?” whispered Professor McGonagall. “Into hiding?”

“Oh no,” said Dumbledore, with a grim smile, “I am not leaving to go into hiding. Fudge will soon wish he'd never dislodged me from Hogwarts, I promise you.”

“I'm sorry, sir,” Harry said suddenly. “I should have -”

“Do not worry yourself. This permits me the chance to follow several leads that I need to pursue. You have done admirably in running the Potter's Commandos, and I shall make your parents aware of how proud I am. I will also make them aware that you are likely to come under greater ... attention from Dolores. Perhaps that will be enough to keep them from doing some of the worst that the Ministry might try.” He clasped his hand on Harry's shoulder. “Be well, my friend. As an American general said nigh unto fifty years ago – 'I shall return'.” With that, he disappeared in a flash of flame with Fawkes, and Harry closed his eyes tightly.

“Where is he?” demanded Fudge moments later as the others awoke. “He was just here!”

“I don't know!” Harry exclaimed. “Is it safe to open my eyes yet?”

“Yes, yes,” Fudge growled. “Why'd you have them closed in the first place, Potter?”

“Black, sir. With all the dust and flashes of light and everything -”

Fudge interrupted him with an angry dismissive wave as he turned to Shacklebolt and Dawlish. “Well? Go find him!”

Dawlish bolted for the open door, Kingsley following. “Well, I guarantee you that things will be changing around here!” Fudge yelled as he pushed Percy before him.

The bulletin boards and walls explained exactly how things would be changing the very next morning:

BY ORDER OF THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Dolores Jane Umbridge (High Inquisitor) has replaced Albus Dumbledore as Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-eight.

Signed: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic

The notices had gone up all around the school overnight, but they did not explain how every single person within the castle seemed to know that Dumbledore had overcome two Aurors, the High Inquisitor, the Minister for Magic and his Junior Assistant to escape. No matter where Harry went within the castle, the sole topic of conversation was Dumbledore's flight, and though some of the details may have gone awry in the retelling (Harry overheard one second-year girl assuring another that Fudge was now lying in St Mungo's with a pumpkin for a head) it was surprising how accurate the rest of their information was. Everybody knew, for instance, that Harry and Marietta were the only students to have witnessed the scene in Dumbledore's office and, as Marietta was now in the hospital wing, Harry found himself besieged with requests to give a first-hand account.

"Dumbledore will be back before long," said Ernie Macmillan confidently on the way back from Herbology, after listening intently to Harry's story. "They couldn't keep him away in our second year and they won't be able to this time. The Fat Friar told me -" he dropped his voice conspiratorially, so that Harry, Ron and Hermione had to lean closer to him to hear "- that Umbridge tried to get back into his office last night after they'd searched the castle and grounds for him. Couldn't get past the gargoyle. The Head's office has sealed itself against her." Ernie smirked. "Apparently, she had a right little tantrum."

"Oh, I expect she really fancied herself sitting up there in the Heads office," said Hermione viciously, as they walked up the stone steps into the Entrance Hall. "Lording it over all the other teachers, the stupid puffed-up, power-crazy old -"

"Now, do you *really* want to finish that sentence, Granger?"

Draco Malfoy had slid out from behind the door, closely followed by Crabbe and Goyle. His pale, pointed face was alight with malice.

"Afraid I'm going to have to dock a few points from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff," he drawled.

"It's only teachers who can dock points from houses, Malfoy," said Ernie at once.

"Yeah, we're prefects, too, remember?" snarled Ron.

"I know *prefects* can't dock points, Weasel," sneered Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle sniggered. "But members of the Inquisitorial Squad -"

"The *what?*" said Hermione sharply.

"The Inquisitorial Squad, Granger," said Malfoy, pointing towards a tiny silver 'I' on his robes just beneath his prefect's badge. "A select group of students who are supportive of the Ministry of Magic, hand-picked by Professor Umbridge -"

"Read – have Death Eaters for parents," Harry added.

"Anyway," Malfoy snarled, looking daggers at Harry, "members of the Inquisitorial Squad *do* have the power to dock points... so, Granger, I'll have five from you for being rude about our new Headmistress. Macmillan, five for contradicting me. Five because I don't like you, Potter, and another fifty for insulting a member of the Board of Governors. Weasley, your shirts untucked, so I'll have another five for that. Oh yeah, I forgot, you're a Mudblood, Granger, so ten off for that."

Ron pulled out his wand, but Hermione pushed it away, whispering, "Don't!"

"Wise move, Granger," breathed Malfoy. "New Head, new times ... be good now, Potty... Weasel ..."

"Remember that what goes around, comes around, Malfoy," Harry said softly.

"Exactly! You've run this school far too long, *Potter*." Laughing heartily, he strode away with Crabbe and Goyle.

"He was bluffing," said Ernie, looking appalled. "He can't be allowed to dock points... that would be ridiculous... it would completely undermine the prefect system."

But Harry, Ron and Hermione had turned automatically towards the giant hour-glasses set in niches along the wall behind them, which recorded the house-points. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw had been neck and neck in the lead that morning. Even as they watched, stones flew upwards, reducing the amounts in the lower bulbs. In fact, the only glass that seemed unchanged was the emerald-filled one of Slytherin.

"Noticed, have you?" said Fred's voice.

He and George had just come down the marble staircase and joined Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ernie in front of the hour-glasses.

"Malfoy just docked us all about eighty points," said Harry furiously, as they watched several more stones fly upwards from the Gryffindor hour-glass.

"Yeah, Montague tried to do us during break," said George.

"What do you mean, 'tried'?" said Ron quickly.

"He never managed to get all the words out," said Fred, "due to the fact that we forced him head-first into that Vanishing Cabinet on the first floor."

Hermione looked very shocked. "But you'll get into terrible trouble!"

“Not until Montague reappears, and that could take weeks, I dunno where we sent him,” said Fred coolly. “Anyway... we've decided we don't care about getting into trouble any more.”

“Have you ever?” asked Hermione.

“Course we have,” said George. “Never been expelled, have we?”

“We've always known where to draw the line,” said Fred.

“We might have put a toe across it occasionally -”

“But we've always stopped short of causing real mayhem.”

“But now?” said Ron tentatively.

“Well, now -” said George.

“- what with Dumbledore gone -” said Fred.

“- we reckon a bit of mayhem -”

“- is exactly what our dear new Head deserves.”

“You mustn't!” whispered Hermione. “You really mustn't! She'd love a reason to expel you!”

“You don't get it, Hermione, do you?” said Fred, smiling at her. “We don't care about staying any more. We'd walk out right now if we weren't determined to do our bit for Dumbledore first. So, anyway,” he checked his watch, “phase one is about to begin. I'd get in the Great Hall for lunch, if I were you, that way the teachers will see you can't have had anything to do with it.”

“Anything to do with what?” said Hermione anxiously.

“You'll see,” said George. “Run along, now.”

Fred and George turned away and disappeared into the swelling crowd descending the stairs towards lunch. Looking highly disconcerted, Ernie muttered something about unfinished

Transfiguration homework and scurried away. "I think we should get out of here, you know," said Hermione nervously. "Just in case."

"Yeah, all right," said Ron, and the three of them moved towards the doors to the Great Hall, but Harry had barely glimpsed the day's ceiling of scudding white clouds when somebody tapped him on the shoulder and, turning, he found himself almost nose-to-nose with Filch the caretaker. He took several hasty steps backwards; Filch was best viewed at a distance. "The Headmistress would like to see you, Potter," he leered.

"They fired you!" said Harry stupidly, thinking of whatever Fred and George were planning.

Filch's jowls wobbled with silent laughter.

"Yeh, and the new Headmistresses rehired me," he wheezed. "Follow me."

Harry glanced back at Ron and Hermione, who were both looking worried. He shrugged, and followed Filch back into the Entrance Hall, against the tide of hungry students.

Filch seemed to be in an extremely good mood; he hummed creakily under his breath as they climbed the marble staircase. As they reached the first landing he said, "Things are changing around here, Potter."

"I've noticed," said Harry coldly.

"Yerse ... I've been telling Dumbledore for years and years he's too soft with you all," said Filch, chuckling nastily. "You filthy little beasts would never have dropped Stink Pellets if you'd known I had it in my power to whip you raw, would you, now? Nobody would have thought of throwing Fanged Frisbees down the corridors if I could've strung you up by the ankles in my office, would they? But when Educational Decree Number Twenty-nine comes in, Potter, I'll be allowed to do them things ... *and* she's asked the Minister to sign an order for the expulsion of Peeves ... oh, things are going to be very different around here with *her* in charge."

"Yeah," Harry grumbled. "Attendance rates will plummet."

"Here we are," he said, leering down at Harry as he rapped three times on Professor Umbridge's door and pushed it open. "The Potter boy to see you, Ma'am."

The only change to the office was a large block of wood that read, in gold letters: 'HEADMISTRESS'. Fred and George's brooms stood chained to the wall behind her. Umbridge was sitting behind the desk, busily scribbling on some of her pink parchment, but she looked up and smiled widely at their entrance.

"Thank you, Argus," she said sweetly.

"Not at all, Ma'am, not at all," said Filch, bowing as low as his rheumatism would permit, and exiting backwards.

"Sit," said Umbridge curtly, pointing towards a chair. Harry sat. She continued to scribble for a few moments. He watched some of the foul kittens gambolling around the plates over her head, wondering what fresh horror she had in store for him.

"Well, now," she said finally, setting down her quill and surveying him complacently, like a toad about to swallow a particularly juicy fly. "What would you like to drink?"

"What?" asked Harry, quite sure he had misheard her.

"To drink, Mr Potter," she said, smiling still more widely. "Tea? Coffee? Pumpkin juice?" As she named each drink, she gave her short wand a wave, and a cup or glass of it appeared on her desk.

"Nothing, thank you," said Harry.

"I wish you to have a drink with me," she said, her voice becoming dangerously sweet. "Choose. One."

Ah. Poisoning or something else, he thought. "Tea, please."

She got up and made quite a performance of adding milk with her back to him. She then bustled around the desk with it, smiling in a sinisterly sweet fashion.

"There," she said, handing it to him. "Drink it before it gets cold, won't you? Well, now, Mr Potter... I thought we ought to have a little chat, after the distressing events of last night."

He said nothing. She settled herself back into her seat and waited. When several long moments had passed in silence, she said gaily, "You're not drinking up!"

He raised the cup to his lips and then, just as suddenly, lowered it. One of the horrible painted kittens behind Umbridge had great round blue eyes just like Mad-Eye Moody's magical one and it had just occurred to Harry what Mad-Eye would say if he ever heard that Harry had drunk anything offered by a known enemy.

"What's the matter?" said Umbridge, who was still watching him closely. "Do you want sugar?"

"No," said Harry.

He raised the cup to his lips again and pretended to take a sip, though keeping his mouth tightly closed. Umbridge's smile widened.

"Good," she whispered. "Very good. Now then ..." She leaned forwards a little. "Where is Albus Dumbledore?"

"No idea," said Harry promptly. *Veritaserum. That's her game.*

"Drink up, drink up," she said, still smiling. "Now, Mr Potter, let us not play childish games. I know that you know where he has gone. You and Dumbledore have been in this together from the beginning. Consider your position, Mr Potter..."

He decided to play with this knowledge of her methods. "He knows that I'd be the first to be questioned. My guess is that he's likely in none of the places that I could think of, for that simple reason." He shrugged. "I won't lie and say that I'd like to help you, but I truly don't know where he's gone."

She turned red in the same manner that she had from the night before, but much to Harry's surprise, calmed quickly, with an annoyed yet thoughtful look.

"Are you certain that you have no idea where he could go?" He looked confused. "Are you having a problem, Mr Potter?"

"Black. And yes. As phrased, I can't answer the question."

"Why not?"

"I can think of a lot of places he could go, but don't know if that's what you really want."

"Where is Albus Dumbledore likely to head, in your opinion?" she asked through gritted teeth.

"He would probably head to his family home, if he has one. He might have visited my parents in Hogsmeade, but wouldn't be there still, and likely wouldn't have told them much of anything other than that he was leaving. He's big on protecting people, and wouldn't tell them anything that could lead the Ministry to him."

"So what you're really saying is that all the sources you can think of are useless."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

She opened her mouth to say something, undoubtedly scathing, based on her facial expression -

BOOM!

The very floor of the office shook. Umbridge slipped sideways, clutching her desk for support, and looking shocked. "What was -?"

She was gazing towards the door. Harry took the opportunity to empty his almost-full cup of tea into the nearest vase of dried flowers. He was disappointed, in a way, that the plant didn't immediately wilt. He could hear people running and screaming several floors below.

"Back to lunch you go, Potter!" cried Umbridge, raising her wand and dashing out of the office. Harry gave her a few seconds' start, muttering "Black," in case she could hear it, then hurried after her to see what the source of all the uproar was.

It was not difficult to find. One floor down, pandemonium reigned. Somebody (and Harry had a very shrewd idea who) had set off what seemed to be an enormous crate of enchanted fireworks.

Dragons comprised entirely of green and gold sparks were soaring up and down the corridors, emitting loud fiery blasts and bangs as they went; shocking-pink Catherine wheels five feet in diameter were whizzing lethally through the air like so many flying saucers; rockets with long tails of brilliant silver stars were ricocheting off the walls; sparklers were writing swear words in midair of their own accord; firecrackers were exploding like mines everywhere Harry looked, and instead of burning themselves out, fading from sight or fizzling to a halt, these pyrotechnical miracles seemed to be gaining in energy and momentum the longer he watched.

Filch and Umbridge were standing, apparently transfixed in horror, halfway down the stairs. As Harry watched, one of the larger Catherine wheels seemed to decide that what it needed was more room to manoeuvre; it whirled towards Umbridge and Filch with a sinister 'whreeeeeeeeee'. They both yelled with fright and ducked, and it soared straight out of the window behind them and off across the grounds. Meanwhile, several of the dragons and a large purple bat that was smoking ominously took advantage of the open door at the end of the corridor to escape towards the second floor.

"Hurry, Filch, hurry!" shrieked Umbridge, "they'll be all over the school unless we do something -*Stupefy!*"

A jet of red light shot out of the end of her wand and hit one of the rockets. Instead of freezing in midair, it exploded with such force that it blasted a hole in a painting of a soppy-looking witch in the middle of

a meadow; she ran for it just in time, reappearing seconds later squashed into the next painting, where a couple of wizards playing cards stood up hastily to make room for her.

“Don't Stun them, Filch!” shouted Umbridge angrily, for all the world as though it had been his incantation.

“Right you are, Headmistress!” wheezed Filch, who as a Squib could no more have Stunned the fireworks than swallowed them. He dashed to a nearby cupboard, pulled out a broom and began swatting at the fireworks in midair; within seconds the head of the broom was ablaze.

Harry had seen enough; laughing, he ducked down low, ran to a door he knew was concealed behind a tapestry a little way along the corridor and slipped through it to find Fred and George hiding just behind it, listening to Umbridge and Filch's yells and quaking with suppressed mirth.

“Impressive,” Harry said quietly through his laughter. “Very impressive ... you'll put Dr Filbuster out of business, no problem ...”

“Cheers,” whispered George, wiping tears of laughter from his face. “Oh, I hope she tries Vanishing them next ... they multiply by ten every time you try.”

The fireworks continued to burn and to spread all over the school that afternoon. Though they caused plenty of disruption, particularly the firecrackers, the other teachers didn't seem to mind them very much.

“Dear, dear,” said Professor McGonagall sardonically, as one of the dragons soared around her classroom, emitting loud bangs and exhaling flame. “Miss Brown, would you mind running along to the Headmistress and informing her that we have an escaped firework in our classroom?”

The upshot of it all was that Professor Umbridge spent her first afternoon as Headmistress running all over the school answering the summonses of the other teachers, none of whom seemed able to rid their rooms of the fireworks without her. When the final bell rang and they were heading back to Gryffindor Tower with their bags, Harry

saw, with immense satisfaction, a dishevelled and soot-blackened Umbridge tottering sweaty-faced from Professor Flitwick's classroom.

"Thank you so much, Professor!" said Professor Flitwick in his squeaky little voice. "I could have got rid of the sparklers myself, of course, but I wasn't sure whether or not I had the *authority*."

Beaming, he closed his classroom door in her snarling face.

Fred and George were heroes that night in the Gryffindor common room. Even Hermione fought her way through the excited crowd to congratulate them.

"They were wonderful fireworks," she said admiringly.

"Thanks," said George, looking both surprised and pleased. "Weasleys' Wildfire Whiz-bangs. Only thing is, we used our whole stock; we're going to have to start again from scratch now."

"It was well worth it, though," said Fred, who was taking orders from clamouring Gryffindors. "If you want to add your name to the waiting list, Hermione, it's five Galleons for your Basic Blaze box and twenty for the Deflagration Deluxe ..."

Hermione returned to the table where Harry and Ron were sitting staring at their schoolbags as though hoping their homework would spring out and start doing itself.

"Oh, why don't we have a night off?" said Hermione brightly, as a silver-tailed Weasley rocket zoomed past the window. "After all, the Easter holidays start on Friday, we'll have plenty of time then."

"Are you feeling all right?" Ron asked, staring at her in disbelief.

"Now you mention it," said Hermione happily, "d'you know ... I think I'm feeling a bit ... *rebellious* at the moment."

Harry could still hear the distant bangs of escaped firecrackers when he and Ron went up to bed an hour later; and as he got undressed a sparkler floated past the tower, still resolutely spelling out the word 'POO'. He went to sleep still chuckling.

He took to disappearing from view quite often, making it much harder for Umbridge to give him detentions, and where he went he never said. The year was winding down quickly – too quickly, it felt sometimes – and his jaunts were one of the only things keeping him sane.

“Where've you been, mate?” Ron finally asked him one night in late April.

“Talking with someone. Things are going to come to a head in the spring – they always do. I just want to be ready.”

“Who have you been talking to?”

“I'd rather not say. Could be dangerous if word got out.”

The next day, after dinner, Umbridge stood, looking a little dishevelled from running around dealing with all of the twins pranks, and said, “Mr Potter, detention with me as soon as I finish dinner.”

He looked confused but did not argue, knowing her tendency toward increasing his punishment if he did anything that even seemed like it might be bucking her authority. He looked to his classmates and they all seemed to waffling between looking daggers at Umbridge and looking confused and sympathetic.

Dinner was over quickly, and he headed toward her office. He found it amusing that she still had not been able to figure out how to get into the proper office for the Headmaster – it seemed as if the school itself had an opinion.

She came down the corridor with a determined look, somehow adding her usual sickly sweet smile into the mixture. “Well, Mr Potter, it's excellent to see you being so punctual.” She motioned him into her office, and motioned him to a seat. Once he was seated, the chair rapidly held him fast with chains.

"Now we get to the true purpose of this meeting," she said in a harsh tone. "I know that you've been meeting with Dumbledore. Now tell me where he is!"

"I have no idea where he is!" Harry yelled at her, and then began trying to pull himself free from the chair.

She smiled her sickly sweet smile at him. "That is the same type chair used by the Wizengamot at trials. You'll not get free of it any time soon, Mister Potter."

"You really are insane, aren't you?" Harry asked. "You've had me doing all those lines over time, using a Contract Quill. I'm incapable of lying now, thanks to you."

She snarled at him. "Do you actually expect me to believe that? You know where Dumbledore is, and you'll tell us! Then we can find him and have him Kissed as he should have been years ago!"

"I won't tell you a thing!" Harry yelled at her.

Her sickly sweet smile returned. "I think that you'll be surprised what you'll tell us, Potter. We have other ways of getting the information from you." She walked to the door and opened it. "Argus? He's all yours now."

The chains released, and Harry was roughly dragged out of the room by the rehired caretaker. Harry knew that this was not good, and as he was dragged into Filch's office, he oddly thought of a phrase from a Muggle book he'd once read – 'double plus un-good' was what came to his mind.

Filch had been spending time getting all the equipment polished, and some of it was actually gleaming. Harry also noted a small fire in the corner, and there were irons in it heating. Several of those irons were already glowing red at the tips. Before he could stop Filch, Harry found himself thrown roughly against the wall hard enough to stun him. This gave Filch the chance to slap him into irons face first against the same wall, locking one hand and one foot in before Harry could fight back. A solid punch to the back of Harry's head gave Filch

the time to lock the other arm and leg, and then chain an iron collar around Harry's neck.

Please let this just be a ploy to get me to talk about something, Harry thought. *I don't really want Filch ...* The caretaker picked up a short scourge and began swinging it experimentally. The ends of each leather strap appeared to be knotted. Harry's 'prayer' was given a resounding 'No!' as an answer when Filch swung the scourge and connected solidly with Harry's back.

"You'll tell us what we need to know, Potter, by the time I'm done with you," Filch sneered. "Now that I've been given permission to deal with you brats the way you should have been all these years ..."

"You honestly think that you won't end up paying for this?" Harry asked through gritted teeth. "Dumbledore will return some day, and so will my family. Do you really expect that Sirius and James and Lily will let you just get away with torturing me?"

"They can't stop me," Filch replied, punctuating it with another WHACK! from the scourge. "Now where is Dumbledore?"

"I don't know."

WHACK! "Tell me!"

"I don't know!"

WHACK! "Tell me!"

"I DON'T KNOW!"

"You're lying, and I'm going to get the truth from you. You've been talking to Dumbledore, and we know it."

"I have not!" WHACK!

"You've been heard talking about speaking with someone, and we know that it's Dumbledore, so you must have an idea where he is!" WHACK!

Harry felt something on his back tear, and thought he could feel a small trickle of blood, but it was quite difficult to be sure amidst all the pain in his back. He gritted his teeth and decided to say nothing more.

That was a mistake, he thought when he awoke later. He was face down on some soft surface and assumed that he was in the hospital wing. If I am, I'm a little surprised. Is Umbridge so sure that she can get away with anything that she's willing to ... of course she is. By letting it be known that a student can face torture to get information, she cows the others from doing or saying anything. With the mail being scanned coming and going, she knows if anyone tried to tell their parents.

"Awake now are we?" came the familiar voice of Madam Pomfrey. The surprise of hearing someone made him tense up, and excruciating pain shot through his back and limbs. He couldn't help the small whimper of pain that escaped him.

"I'd give you something for the pain, Mr Potter, but it would interfere with the other potions currently fixing your other wounds," Madam Pomfrey said with gentleness. Her voice suddenly changed when she continued. "Apparently the ends of the scourge that Filch was using were coated with various ... substances, most designed to make the pain even worse. If I dose you with a pain relief potion, then I run the risk of killing you."

"I understand," he replied, being very careful to not move.

"And we appreciate it, Poppy," a familiar female voice said from the doorway. Harry relaxed even more as he realised that his mother was here. "I will warn you that you may well be seeing a new patient sometime in the next few hours. James and Sirius were not entirely happy with the news we received concerning Harry. I've asked them to be careful in voicing their displeasure, though, since we don't need to be on the run any more than Dumbledore does, wherever he's gotten to." She pulled out a small pad and wrote something on it and handed it to Poppy, who showed it to Harry as well. It read 'High probability of listening charms'.

"I wish he'd at least let some of us know that he's all right," Poppy said. "We worry about him."

The conversation continued for a short time before Umbridge waddled into the room as if being pushed by a strong wind. *Now there's an image I didn't need*, Harry thought.

"What are you doing here?" Umbridge demanded.

"Seeing my badly injured son," Lily said without looking at Dolores.

"And just how were you notified of his injury?" was the indignant response.

"There are any number of ways that I could have been notified, Madam Umbridge," Lily said. "Keep in mind that I *am* a Charms Mistress while your grades in Charms were less than stellar, according to the N.E.W.T.s reports. And these injuries have been documented already and put in a safe place, away from you."

"I demand that you give me your documentation!"

"Demand all you want," Lily said. "Just be aware that the more you do at this school, the worse your prison sentence will be when this is over. When the truth of my son's injuries comes out, do you really think that the Ministry is going to throw its full support behind a woman – and I use that term loosely, mind you – that feels that it is just and proper to torture children?"

"I don't believe that you know just whom you are speaking to, madam," huffed Umbridge.

"Dolores Umbridge, High Inquisitor and temporary Headmistress for Hogwarts while Albus Dumbledore clears his name. Your actions are single-handedly working to remove Cornelius Fudge from office, are you aware of that?"

"How do you figure that, Mrs Black?" sniffed the toad-like woman.

"Simple. There is no way that you can successfully erase the memory of this year from the minds of the students. Some of them will

remember what happened, and they will talk. And when they talk with classmates that don't remember the same incidents? It will eventually hit the Ministry, and Fudge and his crew will go down."

"You speak treason!"

"No, she speaks truth," Madam Pomfrey said. "There are simply too many students to effectively *Obliviate*. The truth will out, Madam Umbridge, no matter the depths that you sink to in order to prevent it."

Chapter 20